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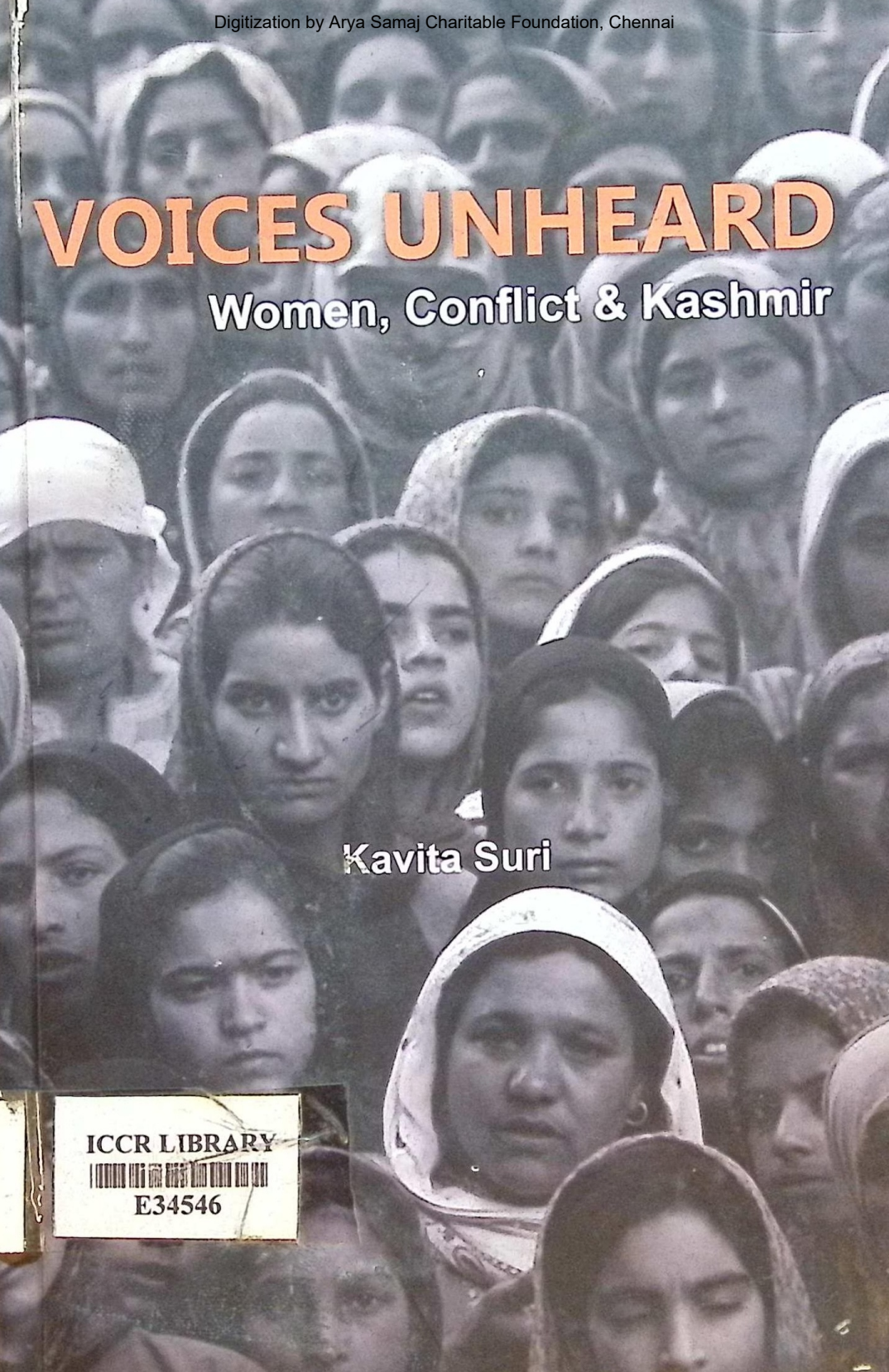
VOICES UNHEARD

Women, Conflict & Kashmir



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Preface

The armed conflict in the Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir has entered its 21st year. All these years of turmoil have witnessed a phase of separatism, militancy, violence and repression but the ugliest side of the sustained violence in the state is its penetration in the lives of its civilian population. Though the horrifying hues of violence have overshadowed almost all dimensions of life, yet the women remain the worst victims of violence in Jammu and Kashmir. Women have suffered on every front – social, political, psychological, economical and educational. The rough estimates suggest that there are over 25,000 widows and 40,000 orphans in the state as a result of the protracted conflict in the mountainous state.

The book "Voices Unheard - Women, Conflict and Kashmir" is a consortium of women voices based on the innumerous journeys that I have undertaken in the past 14 years in the entire length and breadth of the state of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh listening to hundreds of narratives about life and death, trials and tribulations, struggle and survival. From the brave hearts of Marah-Kulali in the border areas situated close to the Line of Control in Poonch who are the members of J&K's first all-woman Village Defence Committee (VDC) defending their families and themselves against those terrorists whom they earlier used to provide shelter, to the widows of Dardpora - the "village of widows" in North Kashmir who had lost their husbands to this mindless violence, one among them offering me walnuts thinking I was a visiting state government official who could provide job to her daughter, the stories of these women are heart wrenching yet the innate resilience makes them emerge as survivors.

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Stories like these were repeated again and again, in different surroundings, in different languages and dialects: Kashmiri, Gojri, Punjabi, Pahari, Ladakhi, Poonch or Bhaderwahi. Only the horror and the pain and the spirit to survive were the same. Traveling in entire state especially rural Kashmir, I had only one main observation - most of these women who have been victims of violence, have been hiding under the veils of silence. No political party fights for their rights and no social group is willing to take up their cause. Thus they continue to suffer silently behind the veils of terror, ignorance, illiteracy and discrimination. There are number of such instances wherein I was left pondering for days together, thinking about them and visualizing their innocent faces which had so many questions.

The book "Voices Unheard: Women, Conflict and Kashmir" documents the experiences of these women in coping with the impact of conflict on their lives and the options before them. By sharing voices of women of Jammu and Kashmir, the book tries to examine as how their multiple identities are created and recreated, how women live up to their roles and how their roles change because of the situation they are in. Though a number of women perspectives have emerged from Kashmir in the past few years, yet the unique thing about this book is that it brings together a plethora of women voices from all the three regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.

The first chapter starts with a brief overview of the conditions of women in conflict while the second chapter is an overview and elaboration of women's own condition as manifested by the twenty year old turmoil in J&K. It is further elaborated in the next four chapters - Kashmiri women, Pandit women, Gujjar women and Ladakhi women - through the stories of women narrated in their own voices.

While there are stories about the women who faced violence perpetrated against them in politically conflicted and militarized areas that Kashmir has become, yet there are amazing stories

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about the resilience of these women who suffered a lot but the conflict provided them a space to resist, negotiate, cope and survive. Chapter three of the book highlights such stories of Kashmiri women who lost their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons to the violence - but after coming out of the initial shock and mourning, donned new roles. There are the voices of those women from the far-flung villages of Kashmir who got exposed to the ruthless world but wore shields of insensitivity and worked towards the betterment of their kids and in few cases, also of their younger siblings. Chapter four revolves around those Kashmiri Pandit women who had to flee their homeland 20 years ago due to terrorist threat and since then they are living in exile. The elder generation of these women still nurses the desire to go back to their roots one day but for those younger one who got the opportunity to study in various professional colleges in Maharashtra or Karnataka, married outside their community, were influenced by other cultures and settled in the metropolis, return to Kashmir is no longer an issue.

While there are voices of women who have faced difficult times as widows, half widows or as the girls who had to face the wrath of terrorists in the wake of burqa threats, Chapter five is based on the stories of Gujjar women who have picked up gun against terrorist violence. Protecting themselves from the militants by picking up gun to save their own honor and their families, these Gujjar women strongly yearn for peace in the absence of violence in their lives. There are also narratives from twin districts of Kargil and Leh of Ladakh region in chapter six. The winds of change have swept the area as women of Kargil and Turtuk - the Indian side of Baltistan which used to be heavily pounded by Pakistani guns in all these years, are coming out of their houses for the first time. The women of Shia-dominated conservative Kargil district and Turtuk in Ladakh had to suffer much during the 1999-Kargil conflict. Even they had to flee their houses to escape the shelling from across the border. Chapter six focuses on the fact that how

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these border women of Kargil and Balti tribal areas of Turtuk are contributing towards peace-building and conflict prevention. Chapter seven is based on those women who are the supporters of various militant outfits as their couriers or under-ground workers besides the women who have been fighting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir Police or Indian army.

The book would not have taken shape had there not been the support of family and friends in this endeavour. I take this opportunity to convey my thanks to my friends who have stood by me always including Dr. Suba Chandran, Director, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi and Mr. S.D. Singh who has always reposed faith in my capabilities and encouraged me to pen down all my field experiences and continue writing and researching tirelessly. I am also thankful to all those people in all the three regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh who helped me in my field visits. My thanks are also due to the hundreds of those women who poured their hearts out to me and shared their stories with me. I also fail in my words to express thanks to my mother Mrs. Poonam Suri who has been my pillar of support, my father late Mr. Vijay Suri who was and will continue to be a guiding force in my life, my brother Vivek Suri and his wife Pooja Suri and the two little ones Vedant and Vaibhav.

Last but not least, I am thankful to Mr. Sanjay Arya of Shubhi Publications, Gurgaon/New Delhi who also published my previous book "Turtuk Unveiled", for agreeing to publish this book also.

Kavita Suri

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Girls undergoing commando training in Sher-e-Kashmir Police Academy, Udhampur

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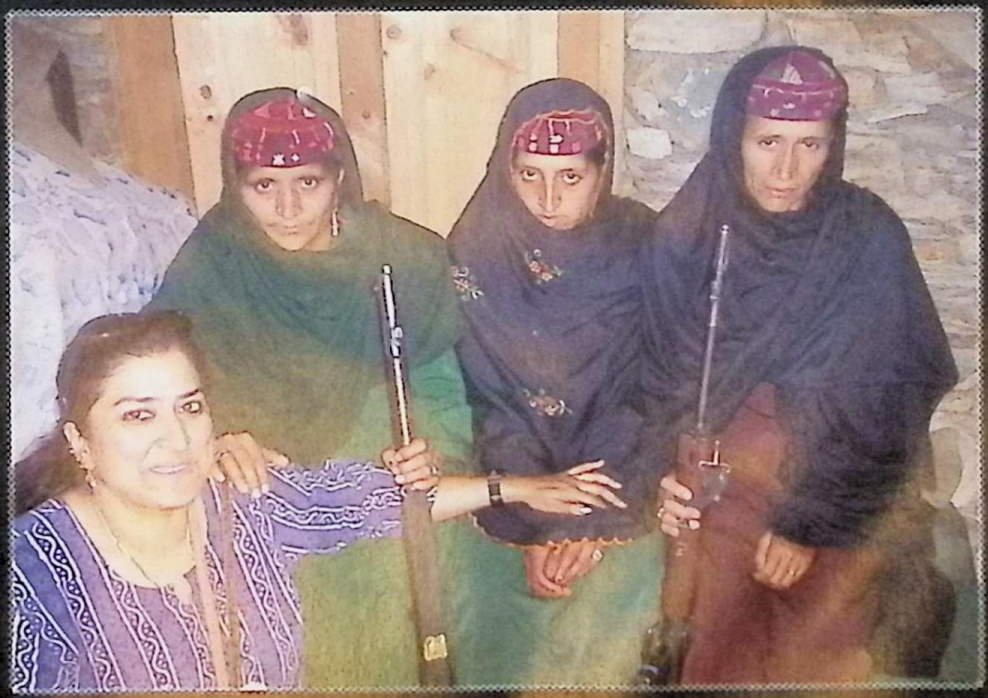
Marium when found by the troops after the terrorists disfigured her



Author at Marah-Kulali with the first all-women VDC members of J.K.

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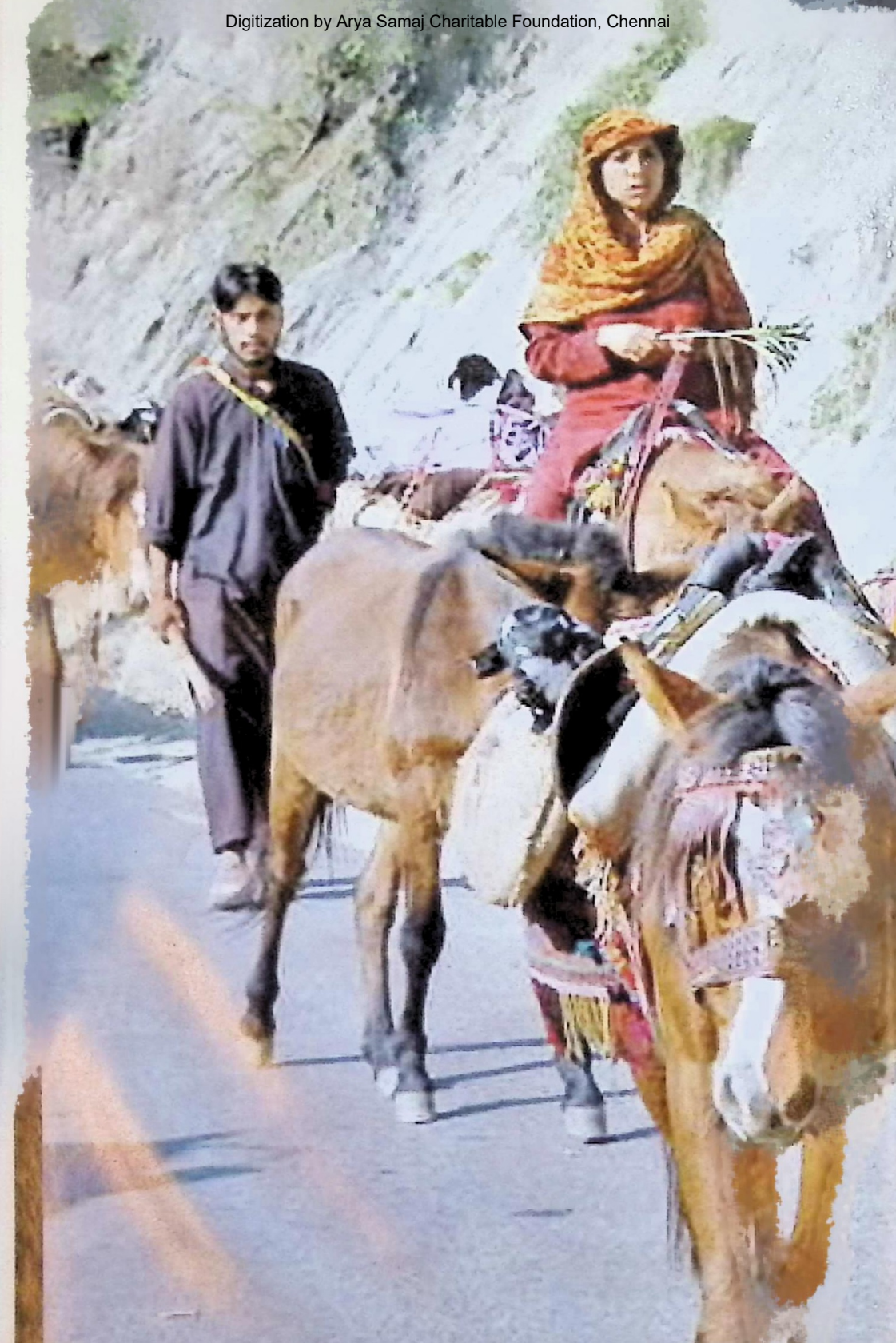

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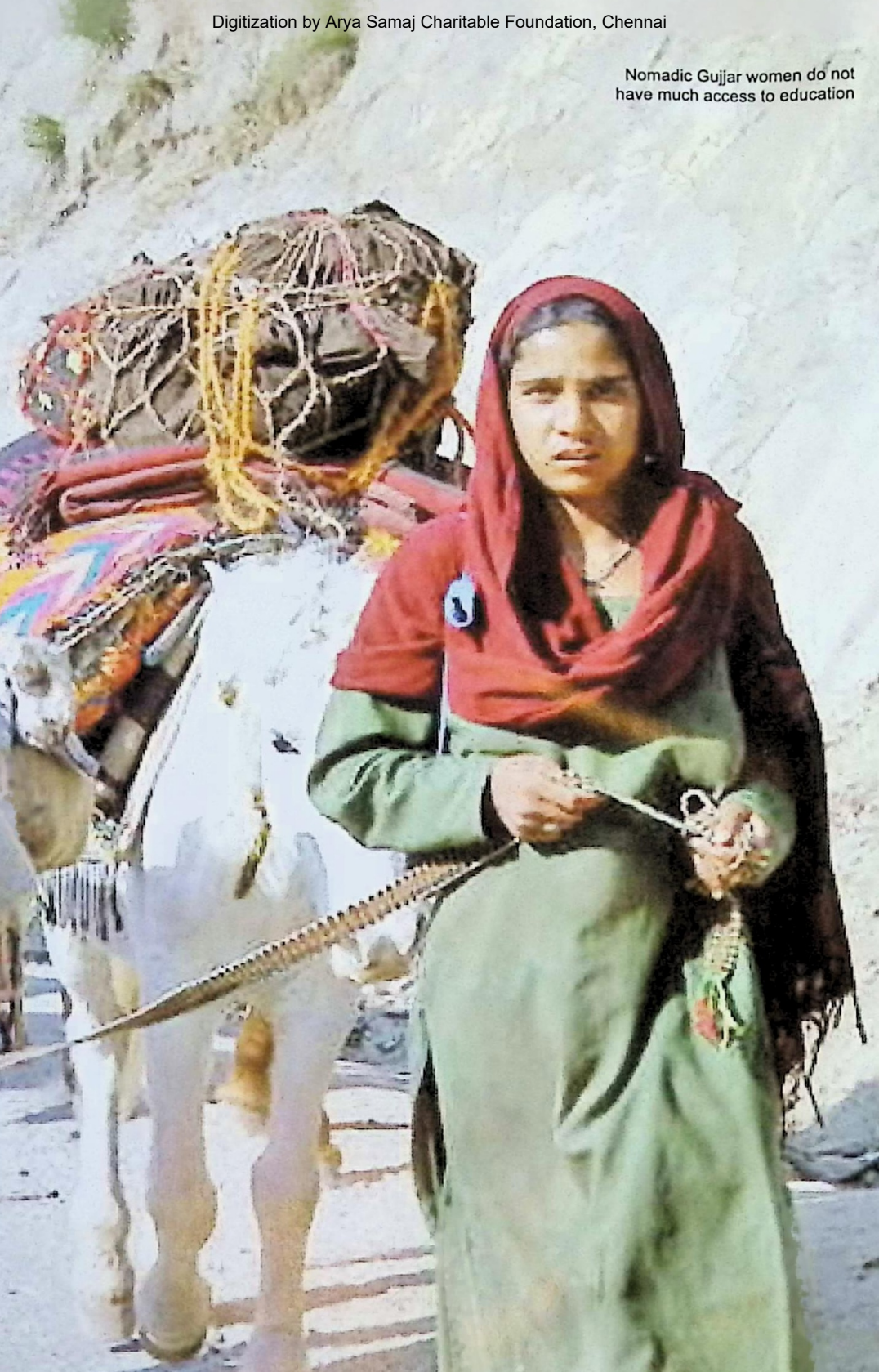

Nomadic Gujjar women do not have much access to education

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A vote for peace - Kashmiri women exercising their right to vote

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1

Women and Conflict
An Overview

Armed conflicts continue to threaten civilian population world over. While millions of men, women and children are injured, killed, displaced, recruited by force, or deprived of basic necessities in armed conflicts, the impact of conflict and the extent of the harm experienced by civilians can never fully be measured. Conflicts not only shatter the comfort of predictable daily routines and expectations but also inflict suffering on everyone. Women, in particular, are affected by its short and long-term effects and thus are among the most vulnerable groups during conflict for more reasons than just violence. Be it the economic deprivation, displacement, poverty or gender-based violence, the costs of conflict are borne disproportionately by women and their children.

Conflicts leave impact on women in a manner which is unique to them. Women face the maximum brunt of violence and become the indirect victims of sexual violence, detention, torture, exploitation, disappearance and loss of loved ones. Such acts of violence which are frequently employed as tools of war against her directly or indirectly, not only affect her quality of life, but the victimization also leads to isolation, alienation, prolonged emotional trauma and unwanted pregnancies. The underlying causes of the vulnerability of women in conflict situations often lie in a general social undervaluation of women

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and their limited access, inter alia, to education, to health services, to job opportunities etc.

Violence against women in armed conflicts constitutes not only physical or sexual abuse but also a violation of their economic, social and cultural rights. In the absence of an earning member in the family, women are forced to earn a livelihood and feed the family which is not easy being part of traditional conservative societies and also due to the shrunk economic opportunities in the wake of the conflict. Widows especially are often unable to provide for themselves and their families due to cultural and religious restraints, lack of education etc. Women are not always able to obtain meaningful employment and are therefore unable to provide for their families. In this process the pressure on women increases manifold. The governments also are either unwilling or unable to provide the necessary social services to them and often fail to recognize the role of women in maintaining social order during conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. They also fail to adequately recognize the particular harm suffered by women. Woman's lack of awareness of matters such as property and inheritance rights also leads to her further disempowerment.

Conflict situations also have a detrimental effect of trauma on women who are likely to have suffered psychologically in different ways than men as a result of personal loss, separation from family, rape or other physical abuse. Women become the soft targets for both state agents as well as the militants. They are harassed, molested, raped by militants, security forces etc. Rape in particular affects not only the female victim but also her family and community who are forced to witness it. Violence against women in the context of conflict has a broader effect on the viability and sustainability of other development programs and dimensions of social welfare. The trauma, adverse health impact and loss of educational opportunities and productivity suffered by women has an effect both through

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the additional burden on social institutions and the loss of the full social contribution of women whose critical role in overall development is now axiomatic.

Women are also seen mostly as the passive victims of conflict. But a closer look at the way women are impacted by conflicts reflects multidimensionality in the way women are located in it. Women are rarely mere passive victims of conflict and do play active roles in the events that lead to fighting and instability, and even in combat itself. Although women's roles vary in every conflict, they generally fall into various categories like active participants (combatants), supporting participants or shields (forced or voluntary followers, cooks, wives etc.), victims of war, newly responsible care providers, agents of change etc. An important dimension of the relationship between women and conflict is women's involvement with combatant forces. Women are found among combatants as forced participants as dependent "followers" of fighters, in supporting roles assisting fighters but not carrying weapons, as "shields" for combatants and as active combatant soldiers. Despite this, women assume the key role of ensuring family livelihood in the midst of chaos and destruction and are particularly active in the peace movement at the grassroots level, cultivating peace within their communities. However, the absence of women at the peace negotiating table is undeniable.

The experiences of women in Jammu and Kashmir are no different. The armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir has entered its 21st year. The past two decades of conflict have deeply affected people's livelihood, their living environments, health, eating habits, their work and workplaces, their access to education and so on. But it is the women of Kashmir who have felt its impact most severely. Women in the conflict-ridden state of Jammu and Kashmir who are the victims of violence, have been labeled as mothers of disappeared sons; wives of disappeared or slain husbands; wives of militants; women

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victims of physical abuse; women heads of households, etc. They themselves have also been direct victims of the physical and sexual violence ranging from rape to kidnapping, murder to molestation. Several cases of molestation, rape, and even gang rape have been reported in past 21 years.

As witnessed in conflict situations elsewhere, the women of Jammu and Kashmir have also played the role of survivors and resistors by sometimes coping with the situation and defying at other times. Women in Jammu and Kashmir experience conflict in a complex and even contradictory manner. Conflict has enhanced the feeling of powerlessness of women here when a number of them have been left as destitute widows or half-widows, or have been raped, or subjected to various kinds of violence. Yet, at the same time, conflict has also seen the empowered women - women demonstrating on the streets to know whereabouts of the detained and disappeared men, women resisting the imposition of moral codes and thus repeatedly opposed the imposition of veil as a mark of Kashmiri identity, women refusing to support the violence even if in the name of 'cause' when it starts victimizing its own people. Women are also agents of violence as well as of peace.

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2

Women & Conflict in Kashmir

Past & Present

Historically, women in Kashmir always led peaceful lives. In traditional Kashmiri society, Kashmiri women generally remained confined to their households. Their social role was minimal but their condition was much better than women in other parts of the country. Most of them would be busy in the upbringing of their children and managing domestic affairs while men generally assumed the role of bread earners.

Traditionally, Kashmiri women played a little role in the economic and political life. Kashmiri women from aristocratic families enjoyed good life style whereas rural women participated in agricultural chores with their men. However, this did not provide them economic independence or higher social status in Kashmir's patriarchal society. Except for those belonging to the *Khawaja* or *Peer* or *Syed* (higher class of Muslims) clan, Kashmiri women did not adopt *Purdah* even. Kashmir society was also a very peaceful society. There was very little crime in the society. In extreme circumstances, the only men folk would indulge in *"Kanger-Jang"*- (throwing of Kangri-the fire pot-on each other). Two oft-quoted examples regarding Kashmiri women by my maternal grandmother, a traditional Kashmiri Pandit woman whose parents hailed from Vicharnag, a village in the outskirts of Srinagar city, were that the Kashmiri women became unconscious when an aircraft

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flew over the Valley for the first time as the sound of engine of the plane shocked them. And any Kashmiri woman wearing heavy golden jewelery would walk on the roads of Srinagar in the middle of the night and would feel totally safe. That is what Kashmir of bygone era was. In such circumstances when violence was unheard of Kashmir and when there was very little crime or violence in the peaceful society, the abnormal conditions prevailing in Kashmir since past 20 years have taken a toll of Kashmiri women in a big way.

Kashmiri women before and after 1947

Women's position began changing in Kashmir after the 1930s – the era which ushered in political change during the rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. Kashmiri women participated in the political movement for 'Quit Kashmir' led by Sheikh Abdullah in 1931, which was progressive and sought equal participation of women in every sphere. After independence, reforms took place in various areas including education, which freed Kashmiri women from their shackles. Since 1947, the state government helped women to enter various fields and gain economic freedom to improve their status. Educated women got their children educated to enter professions like medicine, law, engineering, education, and administration. Conditions improved for women and children from 1947 to 1989 until militancy erupted in Kashmir.

Kashmiri women since 1989

The armed conflict in Kashmir, which started in 1989 between the militants and security forces, has trapped every group, class and community. Years of strife have taken a toll on the inhabitants, but the worst sufferers have been Kashmiri women who are the soft targets. They have suffered from violence by the terrorists and security forces on the social, psychological, emotional, economical and educational fronts.

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Twenty years of bloodshed and the violence still continues in Jammu and Kashmir, though at much lower levels. But the years of turmoil has given rise to an army of widows who have lost their husbands. Though there is no authentic data on the number of widowed women in Kashmir, yet the rough estimates suggest that about 25,000 widows are living a hand to mouth existence in valley.

There are scores of women whose husbands are missing; there is uncertainty whether they are dead or alive. These women, described as "half widows", are most pathetic, running from pillar to post to discover the whereabouts of their missing husbands. The border village of Dardpora in North Kashmir is known as the village of widows since there is hardly any male member left in the village. Most of the men from this village were *Mujahids* who were killed in this violence. Living in fear has increased the number of girl dropouts as their parents; especially in rural areas do not let them go to schools, resulting in depression among these girls.

The displacement of about three lakh Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley has also caused psychological and behavioral problems associated with severe neurotic symptoms like acute anxiety, depression, and hysterical reactions and so on. The plight of Kashmiri Pandit women living in refugee camps in Jammu is horrendous.

The impact of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir on women can broadly be studies under four sections:-

- Social
- Educational
- Political
- Psychological

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SOCIAL

Widows of Kashmir

Kashmir has an army of widows who have lost their husbands in the mindless violence. Rough estimates suggest that over 25,000 women have been widowed in Kashmir and there are some 40,000 orphan children in the Valley. There are three types of widows in Kashmir-widows of people killed by the terrorists, widows whose spouses were killed in the cross firing and thirdly, the widows of militants. Most of these widows come from rural Kashmir; the number of widows in urban Kashmir is much less.

Widows suffer on various accounts. Many are thrown out of their in-laws' houses after getting the ex-gratia relief (a sum of Rs one lakh for innocent civilians), while wives of militants killed by the security forces do not get anything. Forced by circumstances, most of these women now live separately or with their parents. Only a few are still living with their in-laws. What is pathetic is the fact that, in some cases, the in-laws has divided the children between their maternal and paternal homes.

As family planning is not practiced much in rural Kashmir, these widows have three to six children on the average. Most are unemployed and are sustained by relatives, neighbours, NGOs, government relief, *Sadka-e-Fitr, Zakat,* parent's support, brother's support, in-laws' support, children's support, part time business, handicrafts, husband's savings, husband's salary/ pension and agricultural activities. Government support, in cases of civilian deaths, usually reaches the widows after two or more years of their husband's death. The corrupt system in Kashmir adds to their suffering. For receiving financial support after their husbands' deaths, widows narrate malpractices in releasing the money to them. The concerned officials often ask for some percentage from the relief, which they are forced to

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give. In the absence of welfare programmes, some women are reduced to begging to meet their needs. Many beg on the streets in areas outside their residential localities. Most are seen with their children outside mosques, shrines, petrol filling stations and hospitals.

For these widows, several problems crop up after the death of their husbands. Problems like emotional stress, sexual harassment, social non-acceptance, inability to manage finances, losing control over children, inferiority complex, loneliness, physical insecurity, over-work, feeling of insecurity, meager income, deterioration of family environment, difficulty in finding good matches for their children, denial of property rights, health issues and compulsion to remarry are common among these women. Suffering from various ailments, they do not go to doctors or psychiatrists, but prefer to spend their scarce resources on the children who remain their major concern.

Due to various psychological ailments, they have a high tendency to commit suicide. At least 80 per cent of the widows have very high suicidal tendencies after their husbands' death and break-up of the family. They also have other psychological problems leading to major mental health problems with some morphing into depression. The indifferent attitude of the authorities and people towards these widows increases their sympathy for the militants and turns them against the state.

Broken Families

The dislocation of widows after their husbands' death, often result in broken families as there is a sudden break in normal family life. Some widows oscillate between their parental and in-laws' homes. Some leave their children with their in-laws, but most are forced to shift them. Many widows feel that they are parasites for their relatives or husband's friends. Though Islam permits remarriage, most Kashmiri widows do not wish

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to remarry to provide security to their children. A few have remarried or intend to remarry, but keep their children with themselves if their new husbands do not object.

The trauma of women forced to leave their children with grand-parents after their remarriage while they live elsewhere is much. Other problems faced by widows include deterioration in the family environment and losing social control over their children which has a negative impact on their personality growth. The state government pays a meager Rs 200 per month to widows, destitute and handicapped persons in the Valley under the Integrated National Security Scheme.

The families of those women who have been killed in this mindless violence have also suffered. Their children have been orphaned and in most of the case, fathers have remarried.

Half Widows of Kashmir

Besides the widows who reconcile to their husbands' deaths, there are women in Kashmir whose husbands are missing or have disappeared. These "Half-widows" of Kashmir lead a more miserable life than widows. They keep running from pillar to post to get some information about their husbands' whereabouts, trudging to police stations and courts to trace their sons, husbands and brothers. As their husbands have not been declared dead, though missing, they are not entitled to the cash relief given to dependents of militancy victims.

This phenomenon has a measurable economic and psychological impact, since it is usually the earning member of the family who goes missing and the psychological impact on their families is tremendous as they live in constant uncertainty and trauma.

Half widows face various economic, social, and emotional insecurities. These various insecurities are compounded rather than addressed by the legal and administrative remedies

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currently available to half widows. Further, children of half widows are often particularly traumatized, showing extreme resentment and loneliness and are vulnerable to impoverishment and exploitation. While most half widows show immense strength and resilience acting as the sole breadwinners for their families and overcoming massive trauma, they continue to be deprived of the assistance and justice they deserve.

According to the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), an association of the relatives of disappeared persons formed in 1994, since the conflict started in Jammu and Kashmir, hundreds of Kashmiris come in the Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances category, The State officials claim that these persons have joined militant outfits, which is disputed by their families. The state police officials have a list of 2,338 Kashmiri men who have crossed the border and are in Pakistan or Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir. Interestingly, their suffering wives have now approached the state government for granting them visa so that they can go and visit them. The sufferings of such ladies are immense as most of them do not know whether their spouses have re-married in Pak-occupied-Kashmir or not.

A recent report released by The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in August 2011, entitled "Half Widow, Half Wife- Responding to Gendered Violence in Kashmir" provides a gender analysis of situation of half widows as well as of the larger security situation in Kashmir. As per the report, there are, at a minimum, 1,500 half widows in Jammu and Kashmir.

Forced Marriages

When militancy broke out in Jammu and Kashmir in 1990's, it was so much glorified that girls were drawn towards young chaps carrying guns. In the initial years of turmoil, there was considerable euphoria with Kashmiri families sympathizing

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with the "*Mujahideen* cause". When the 'Mast Guls' first appeared in Kashmir with their flowing manes, they had a romantic "Che Guevara" image. Parents of many girls married them off to militants; in fact, a wave swept Kashmir in which several girls married militants. A number of '*Nikahs*' or marriages with the local girls took place. They saw heroes in them who could get *Azadi* for Kashmir and thus became victim of their lust voluntarily, even with the tacit support of their parents, a new phenomenon in Kashmir society. Women used to sing traditional songs welcoming gun-wielding militants and even showered flowers/confectionery on their vehicles.

The girls and their parents however soon realized to their shock that while the Foreign Terrorists (FTs) had come only for a about two-year tenure of Jihad, the locals were to be killed by security forces. After the FTs vanished leaving the Kashmiri girls with fatherless children and unwanted pregnancies, people in the villages now began to resist and oppose these *Nikahs* with terrorists. The euphoria slowly died down.

But the side-effects of militancy manifested in big sudden change in Kashmir's social order. Boys from lower strata became too demanding, seeking matrimonial from upper middle class families at the point of gun. Where consent was not available, militants violated modesty of women at gunpoint. They also began to force married women to do their 'Jihadi duty' to comfort the warriors. In the garb of shelter, they not only started demanding food but also girls in the houses they chose at will, particularly in rural areas. In Kashmiri society, termination of pregnancies assumed alarming proportions.

Enforcing Islamic Codes

Few years ago, Dukhtaran-e-Millat (daughters of the faith), an all-woman outfit headed by Asiya Andrabi, supported a new outfit called Lashkar-e-Jabbar (LeJ), which came into prominence after its activists threw acid on two women in

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Srinagar for not being dressed in 'Islamic' style. However, Kashmiri women rejected this campaign for the "beginning of a comprehensive social reform movement based on true Islamic thought". Women also rejected the outfits' diktat not to take up government jobs. Interestingly, no one in Kashmiri society - male or female - adhered to another diktat where bus operators were asked to allot half the seats for women passengers.

Following the Burqa threat by LeJ and DeM and throwing of acid in Srinagar, some women began wearing burqas which flooded the markets in various designs, colours and prices. There was a competition to wear the latest designer burqas, and it again became a fashion statement. The Islamic militants failed to enforce conservative standards, but it helped girls to meet their male friends. Thus, Kashmiri women used the burqa for their own purposes.

Conflict and Prostitution

The flesh trade, prostitution and trafficking of women were unknown and taboo earlier but Kashmir no longer remained untouched by them. Though sociologists used to discuss this issue in hushed tones, a bold statement for the first time came from Prof Bashir Dabla, the well known Kashmiri sociologist who termed it a "degenerative inferno which can engulf Kashmiri society". The emergence of flesh trade and prostitution in Kashmir, according to him, was directly linked to the imposition of the Islamic dress code by militant groups in Kashmir. When LeJ and DeM tried to enforce Islamic dress code on Kashmir women, Dabla told his students and colleagues that it would result in a very strong and dangerous reaction from Kashmiri women as "any social change imposed on society has serious implications".

Couple of years later, infamous Kashmir sex scandal shook Ghulam Nabi Azad-led Congress government. One of J&K's most influential bureaucrats and a senior officer of Indian

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Administrative Service (IAS) who was also former chief minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's principal secretary, was arrested by CBI for his alleged involvement in the infamous 'Srinagar sex scandal' besides two ministers, a DIG of BSF, a DSP of J&K Police, a former Additional Advocate General of the State etc. The magnitude of the racket and the fact that it operated in the heart of Srinagar, shook Kashmir's conservative society.

Much before the surfacing of Kashmir sex scandal, the Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Liberation Party headed by its chairman Mr. Hashim Qureshi had launched a campaign against over about 150 hotels and restaurants in Srinagar city only which had introduced cabin culture in the past few years. The boys and girls would pay Rs 100-150 per hour and spend hours there indulging in the amoral activities. In response to DLP campaign, the police did conduct some raids in few restaurants in Srinagar and found few boys and girls but let them off after a warning. The next year, police arrested seven persons involved in trafficking of three Kashmiri girls to other states for flesh trade.

Brides without Grooms

Kashmiri society is witnessing a dearth of grooms in the Valley. A major crisis has surfaced in Kashmir's marriage market. Girls cannot find proper grooms. Parents cannot find qualified grooms, so families are left with no choice but to compromise. Highly educated girls have married boys with less education, which has now become a pattern. Besides, the violence in Kashmir has forced many boys to leave Kashmir for their studies or better career prospects. Hundreds of young boys who joined the militancy have also been killed.

Many boys who have good jobs and enjoy social standing want highly qualified wives from affluent backgrounds. Young men have become selective in these economically hard times and want working women to support the family. Middle class boys

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want to marry government employees like school-teachers who have an assured salary and also the time to take care of children. Shortage of grooms in Kashmir has resulted in an increase in the age of marriage for girls. Before the militancy erupted, women in Kashmir got married in their early or mid-20s. Those who wanted higher qualifications or jobs married in their late 20's or 30s's. But now girls remain unmarried till 35 or even 40 years.

Delayed marriages have resulted in increased stress with a rise in congenital disorders, particularly Down's syndrome, which is associated with the age of the mother at childbirth. There has also been an increase in recurrent abortions and gynecological complications. *'Multi Dimensional Problems of Women in Kashmir'*, a study sponsored by the Planning Commission, suggests that late marriages, which is a growing reality in Kashmir, affects the general health of couples and their children. The prolonged turmoil has also intensified class divisions. Most parents do not have the money to marry off their daughters, but militancy has brought in lot of money and the demand for dowry has gone up, the study adds.

POLITICAL

Women issues not on anybody's agenda

Faced with militancy for over two decades now, the women of Jammu and Kashmir have been the worst victim of turmoil. But unfortunately, this border state which has a majority of Muslims, has hardly any vocal voice which could highlight their pain and agony. Even the respective state governments which have neglected the women of the state since long, haven't done anything to better their position. The present National Conference-Congress coalition government has many other compulsions and problems of running a coalition government than discussing the women-related issues in violence-torn state. The fact remains that none of the political parties including the

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National Conference, People Democratic Party or even the Congress which are boastful of protecting women rights, haven't done anything for the betterment of women of the conflict-hit state. Violence against the women is on increase and nobody is serious about their plight. Women were already suffering much in a state like Jammu and Kashmir where opportunities are limited but then terrorism added more to it.

The apathetic attitude of the present government towards women's issues in troubled J&K is quite evident from the fact that the Jammu and Kashmir State Women Commission (the only representative body of the women in the state which was constituted to safeguard the rights provided to the neglected lot under the constitution of India) remained headless for almost eight years in the past ten years of its inception. While it remained headless for six years during Mufti Sayeed's rule in the state, it also remained without chairperson for couple of years during National Conference government also.

The Jammu and Kashmir State Commission for Women was set up in 2000 after the Farooq Abdullah-led National Conference government got the Jammu and Kashmir State Commission for Women Act, 1999 passed by the Jammu and Kashmir state legislature after the assent of the Governor on 13 April 1999.The main objective of Women's Commission which ultimately saw the light in March 2000,was to investigate and examine all matters relating to women, review constitutional laws affecting the fairer sex, get them amended if necessary, generate awareness about the Commission among the women, form the network of NGOs and the media for the purpose.

Signaled as the first step towards the empowerment of Kashmiri women, the Commission was given a chairperson, one additional secretary and two part time members. Dr Girija Dhar, renowned doctor-surgeon was taken in as the chairperson. However, for lack of adequate funds, infrastructure, etc, the

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Commission could never take off. And when the Mufti Sayeed government took over in 2002, Dr Dhar resigned as she was being seen as an NC appointee.

Since Dr Dhar's resignation and even much before, the state government maintained a mysterious silence over the State Women Commission. No efforts were made to find some deserving successor to Dr Dhar to head the Commission which simply reflects its pathetic attitude not just towards the premier women body but to the women who are already facing a tough time due to turmoil. During the Mufti regime, J&K SWC remained headless throughout its tenure of six years. The National Conference-Congress coalition government took over the reins in January 2009 and for over a year, the Commission was without head again.

As such, no steps have been taken to give some teeth to the Women's Commission which could protect the rights of the Kashmiri women whose woes have multiplied in the absence of a strong Women's Commission. While the National Commission for Women (NCW) has no jurisdiction over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, there is a dire need of a strong SWC in the troubled state. The State Human Rights Commission, mandated to investigate complaints of human rights violations and make recommendations to the government, has not been effective enough to make a difference.

EDUCATIONAL

Since insurgency broke out in Kashmir in 1989 amidst growing political instability, the education sector became the first target of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence. Its focus was students studying in various schools and colleges in the Valley. The ISI tried its best to exploit the youth to make them their operatives and join the jihad.

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In the conflict zone in these past years, hundreds of schools and colleges were gutted. While many of the institutions were actually forced to shut down completely by the terrorists, on the other hand, security forces occupied many school buildings, as they had no place to stay when they arrived in Kashmir to curb insurgency. There are plenty of instances when girls were coerced into quitting studies, cowering under a Taliban-like system in the Valley. There is immense pain and anguish in the hearts of these girls who had wanted to do something meaningful, but the conflict forced them to sit at home.

In the first phase of violence (1989-1999), education was badly hit by the turbulence. The state of Jammu and Kashmir now ranks 33rd (Census 2001) in terms of literacy among the states of India, with a 54.46 per cent literacy rate. Living in constant fear of the gun has led to an increase in the number of girl drop-outs, as their parents would not allow them to go to school. The result is that girls often suffer from depression and anxiety.

The official data of J&K government showed that during the period of militancy, at least 828 educational institutions were gutted, besides extensive damage done to laboratory equipment, furniture and libraries. Of these, about 596 buildings were gutted in Kashmir Valley and 233 institutions in the Jammu division. Of the 596 schools in the Kashmir region, about 276 were primary schools, 146 middle schools, 129 high schools and 45 higher secondary schools which were razed by terrorists. In the Jammu region, 119 primary schools, 62 middle schools, 43 high schools and eight higher secondary schools were damaged. At least 233 schools were damaged in the Jammu region alone.

The gutting or damaging of schools buildings had a direct impact on the number of students. While a few parents shifted their children to other private or government schools, in many instances, parents did not send their kids to school thereafter. In many cases, these students were girls forced to sit at home.

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What added to the woes was the occupation of the remaining educational institutions by security forces.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Psychological trauma has destroyed the social fabric in the Valley. Disconcertingly, Kashmiris have developed many psychological problems. Doctors have noticed an unprecedented increase in mental disorders due to the decade long insurgency. Routine killings, encounters, cross firing, grenade blasts, identification parades, search and cordon operations have created a fear psychosis in the people leading to depression, anxiety and related disorders. Before the violence began there were hardly any women going to psychiatrists. Now, a large number of women are thronging psychiatric hospitals following a spurt in neurological disorders as they have witnessed bloodshed and the killing of their husbands, children, brothers, fathers, and sisters.

In the Government Hospital for Psychiatric Diseases in Srinagar, the number of outpatient cases has gone up from 20 to 125 per day since 1989. Statistics reveal that in the year 1989, about 1700 patients visited the valley's lone Psychiatric hospital and in the year 2002, the number of patients had gone to 48000, the number continues to increase each year. Most patients visiting the hospital are women and young men suffering from depression, insomnia and stress. Treatment includes tranquilizers and anti-depressants. In hospitals, women and villagers complain of "heart problem," which is their way of describing psychological trauma, stress and fear that has sunk into their hearts while living with terror. Most of the women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders like recurrent and distressing recollection of events, marked irritability, outbursts of anger, difficulty in concentrating, sleeplessness, depression and disinterest in social or domestic activities. Violence-related problems - emotional stress, lack of social adjustment, mis-managing domestic affairs and children, inferiority complex,

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physical insecurity, and compulsions for remarriage among widows and half widows- have afflicted Kashmiri women. Suicidal tendencies are also seen among them.

Women also suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to harassment by either the militants or security forces. Consequently, women either become violent or develop a phobia. Doctors believe that no more than 10 percent of those in need of psychiatric care are approaching the hospitals because of the social stigma associated with psychological disorders.

Suicides in Kashmir

Prior to the nineties, suicide was taboo and its rate was minimal, but a 10-fold increase in suicides has occurred over the last 20 years. It is common among teenage girls. The fear, stress, tension and uncertainty prevailing in the state are the main reasons explaining this rise in suicides. A study in 2002 revealed that among some 10 lakh psychiatric patients, around one lakh were diagnosed with suicidal tendencies. 20 percent of this number does attempt suicide.

Poverty, unemployment and drug addiction are other causes of suicide, facilitated by the easy availability of organo-phosphorous substances in villages. Doctors in Kashmir considers low tolerance levels to be a significant factor caused stress due to the increasing violence in Kashmir, which has resulted in the loss of self-control. People overreact to any kind of situation and in the spur of the moment decide to end their lives. Women are more sensitive; hence the incidence of suicide among them is much higher than among men.

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3

Kashmiri Women

3.1 Violence

The Bleak Widows

In the recent troubled history of Kashmir, two villages have hogged top headlines in the newspapers. Interestingly, both of these two villages – Dardpora and Kunan Poshpora - fall in the border district of Kupwara situated on the Line of Control in North Kashmir. While Dardpora -the border village has got the dubious distinction of being home to army of widows and orphans and thus has come to be known as the "Village of Widows" as there is no single male left in the village, Kunan Poshpora came to limelight when the entire female population of the village was allegedly raped in the initial years of insurgency.

The entire Kashmir was observing the holy month of Ramdhan – the month of fasting before the Eid, when I set out for Kupwara. Dardpora, obviously was the first place on my itinerary. A little bit of chill was in the air and the winter was round the corner. Kupwara was busy stocking things for the winter when I visited Dardpora the literal meaning of which in Urdu language is "Village of Pain". The name itself very truly reflects the pain and misery the people have gone through in this small hamlet.

For the last twenty years, Dardpora villagers have been trapped in the cross-fire of militants and security forces. Dardpora and

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its adjacent hamlet Satboin were once a hot- bed of militancy as it was close to the Line of Control. Most of the men folk joined the *"Tehreek"* (freedom movement) when insurgency broke out in Valley. And when the security forces zeroed-in, most of them got killed leaving behind young widows and minor children.

Approximately, around 120 women have become widows and 400 children have become orphans in Dardpora village having a population of 10,000. Ostracized by the parents and society, the women folk are the worst hit in the village. Every household has at least one widow. As there is no source of livelihood to them, poverty, illiteracy and ignorance has forced most of the women to beggary to feed their children. With no one coming to their rescue, the women are suffering in silence.

Life has not been easy for Shahmali, a mother of five girls and two boys. With the killing of her husband Mohammed Abdullah Bhat by unidentified gunmen in June 1995, she lost all her all fortunes. Her husband would cultivate his small piece of land and would also go to Punjab to work in the winters. Life was moving on till he died. Now, Shahmali lives on peanuts and struggles to arrange even two-time meal for the family.

Ask her about the education of her kids and she hits back: "When we don't know what we are going to eat in the evening, when we are struggling hard for our survival, how I can send my daughters to the school?" Her daughter Safeena was six year old when her father was killed and the eldest one was just 15. In the initial years, Shahmali continued sending Safeena to the Government Boys Middle School Dardpora (as there is no girls schools here, girls attend boys school only) but then finances became a major problem and she had to withdraw her from the school. Now Safeena helps her mother at home with the daily chores. One of her sons is studying in the neighboring Kralpora Government High School in 11th Class while the other one is sitting idle.

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Is she discriminating between her son and daughter, sending one to school, forcing another one to stay and home? You ask her and touch her raw nerve.

Tears well up in Shahmali's eyes as she speaks in her broken Urdu: *"Ladka To Fate Huae Kapdoin Mein Bhi School Ja Sakta Hai, Ladki Ko To Mein Aise Nahin Bhej Sakti."* (The boys can even go to the school in tatters but I cannot send my girl to the school in torn clothes or shoes as she is a girl). Shahmali says that she wanted her daughters to continue their education but couldn't help. Somehow, she got her two elder daughters married off with the help of the villagers and the Rs one lakh ex-gratia relief that she got from the state government (as her husband was killed in militancy-related incident).

Safeena is just 15-year old but Shahmali is in a hurry to get her married off too. Though she does agree that she is too young to marry but poverty and the struggle for survival has forced her to believe that the orphaned girls should be married off early.

But she is not alone in this village. The 20-year long turmoil has left 120 women as widows and around 400 orphans in Dardpora and all of them are leading miserable lives. The condition of most of them is not different from that of Shahmali and her family. Each family has a tale of woes to narrate.

Like Safeena, Shaheena's widow mother is very eagerly to get her married off. But she is slightly lucky as she has appeared in her matriculation exams and is eagerly awaiting her results. Alone at home with her younger sister Afroza who is studying in class 5th, Shaheena is quite sad as she knows well that she won't be able to compete her studies after this.

"I lost my father when I was in class 4th. My mother somehow sent me to school me as she wanted me to stand on my own feet. But then survival is the problem. I studied in boys' school but now she won't allow me to go to school as there is no

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money," laments Shaheena. Her mother is one of such Dardpora widows who after surviving the trauma, are faced with problems like mismanagement of home affairs, over-burden of works, very meager income, lesser chances of good match for children , loss of child's career etc. Despite all these problems, however, none of the Dardpora widows have remarried.

Ten years ago Subi's husband, Mangta Lone, slain deputy chief of Al-Barq militant outfit was killed by security forces in an encounter. Mother of six, she has lost everything. With no source of income, she is now begging in order to feed her children including a 20-year unmarried daughter. Cursing her fate, Subi feels that her husband's inclination to guns has left her family shattered and she had no other alternative but to beg for survival. However, her begging bowl has put a stigma on her family. Her uneducated daughter has already "crossed the age of marriage" in the society where nuptial knot of girl is tied very early.

"These victims have no money, social status or education," says Manzoor Ahmed Masoodi who is a social worker with Maqbool National Welfare Association (MNWA), a non-governmental organization working for the betterment of destitute women and orphan children in Kashmir in Kupwara. He informs that Dardpora villagers have become victim of all the rival forces-militants, security forces and counter-insurgents. Trauma of insecurity is hunting everyone here. Even their religious leaders were not spared. Since 1995 three Imams of Jamia Masjid Dardpora have fallen prey to the bullets of unknown gunmen.

The families of these slain Imams are experiencing terribly difficult times. Their children have no education and any source of livelihood. Maulana Mohammed Sadiq Mir was a priest in the local Jamia Masjid Mosque. He was arrested by the army on 8th February 1995 in Kralpora. Though he claimed that he had no links with the militants, they still took him away. The

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family alleged that he was killed by them Survived by his wife Jannati Begum and three adult daughters and one son, things are very pretty hard for the family. While many Dardpora widows have resorted to begging along with their children, however, unlike them, the widow of Maulana Mohammad Sadiq Mir does not go for begging. At times her neighbours do help her, however, it hardly suffice her basic needs of food and clothing. None of her daughters is educated.

Maulana Mohammed Akbar Bhat who was also the priest of the same mosque was also killed few years back. In fact, three Maulvis of the same mosque were killed by the unidentified gunmen. Villagers allege that the army killed them as they were apprehensive that they were preaching jihad and separatism to the villagers. Octogenarian Imam, Khazir Mohammad Peer was killed in October 1997 when he was returning from the mosque after attending late evening prayers.

Those families who have no male members in Dardpora, survive on charity. Some of them beg, some of them get *Zakat* (charity) and some get money as *"Sadka-e-Fitr"*. As it was the holy month of Ramdhan, most of the widows of the villages were looking forward to get this money. In this holy month, every Muslim family has a moral duty to give money to these sufferers which is known as *"Sadka-e-Fitr"*. The government support of Rs one lakh has never reached Dardpora widows as they are the 'widows of the militants' and not civilians.

Ironically these people have sunk so deep in despair that they don't know how to come out of their appalling condition and what sort of assistance will make them self reliant. Hashim Qureshi, who runs the voluntary organization MNWA comes to the village sometimes to find out ways as how to alleviate the sufferings of the widows and orphans. He believes that unless the victims are involved in any developmental process meant for them, nothing will move.

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These hapless people want some immediate relief of money, food, clothing and education for their children. Education of the orphans is the basic need. But nothing has been done in this regard by any agency till now. Sadly, the state government has no concrete scheme for the education of the children and rehabilitation of the Dardpora widows.

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A trail of woes

"You are not welcome here. Go away. We don't want to talk to you. People of your kind have been coming here since all these years, selling the plight of our daughters and making money...please go away, we will not talk to you..." These were the words that welcomed me in Kunan Poshpora – the twin hamlets situated in Trehgam block of Kupwara district on the Line of Control in North Kashmir.

Accompanied by Abdul Khaliq Mir who lived in the same village and two Maqbool National Welfare Association volunteers Bashir Ahmed Shiekh and Manzoor Ahmed Masoodi, the visit to Kunan Poshpora - one of the most infamous villages in entire Kashmir was to study how the lives of the people were impacted since that fateful day in 1991 when the entire village clinched international headlines.

The sleepy hamlets of Kunan Poshpora allegedly witnessed mass rape of women during a cordon-and-search operation by personnel of the 4th Rajputana Rifles of the 68 Mountain Brigade on the night of February 23-24, 1991. The incident generated much controversy and enormous publicity given its linkages with human rights and alleged security force excesses. The charge was that 100 women of all age were raped by the troops. Though the incident is still shrouded in mystery as the officials still claim that no such incident occurred, yet the fact remains that the entire village has been stigmatized since past 20 years.

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After all these years, a mere mention of the word *"Akhbhar wali"* (journalist) and the entire village was up in arms against me. "You make money and go and do not do anything for us or our girls," the village women said while refusing to talk. Constant persuasion by Khaliq, one among them, helped and the people started opening up slowly.

Mohammed Sadiq Dhar, 55 recalls that fateful day when he was at home. There was a crackdown in the entire village by the troops of Rajputana Rifles. Heavy snowfall had occurred but the troops asked all the men of the village to come out. They all gathered at Kunan Chowk for interrogation

The allegations are that the troops continued rape for the entire night. Even after so many years of the incident, the stigma attached with Kunan Poshpora refuses to go away. Nobody is willing to marry the girls of the raped village. The stigma of being from a raped village is still associated with the twin hamlets of Kunan Poshpora.

Kunan village comprises of 150 families making it over 2000-3000 people. Among these, most of the girls are still unmarried as there are no takers. Initially, it would seem that people would forget after few years and everything would fall in place. But it did not happen.

Twenty years ago, most of the girls of the village were young. Today, their lives still remain scarred. Most of them are unmarried, few of them have returned to their maternal homes after their brief marriages and almost all of the school and college going girls discontinued their education after the incident as the people of surrounding areas and other villages teased the girls of Kunan. As a part of their household chores, when the groups of village girls would go out to collect firewood in the surrounding forests, they would face the taunting remarks of the people like "You are the ones who were rapes by the troops." Slowly and gradually, the girls stopped going

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out to do this work. And now since past 20 years now, most of them have not left their houses.

Dar married off one of his two daughters Shakeela in Poshpora in 1997 after great difficulty. He had to face hard times in finding a match for her "stigmatized" daughter. Her in-laws would call her names, would torture her and often tell her "they married their son to her knowing the fact that she was a rape victim". When she could bear it no longer, she returned home after few months. She now has two sons and finds it very difficult to survive. The younger one Zarina was married later but she too returned home after one year.

"She would also face the same situation. Still, I sent her back to her in-laws but they would beat her up. They too would tell her that she was a rape victim and that they took pity on her thinking she would bring some good dowry which she did not, "said Dar adding that he forced her daughters to quit studies as he was quite scared after the incident. But laments this step now wishing his daughters were educated.

"I know if they would have studied, they would have been self sufficient and independent. I wonder what would happen to them after me," he said informing that after the infamous incident, over 100 girls of the twin villages quit their studies.

"The whole village has been scarred since past 20 years," said Abdul Dar adding that it was worse for the girls who used to go to primary schools, higher secondary schools and colleges. The girls stopped going to educational institutions as their classmates would taunt them. Those who would go to Government Middle School, Kunan (the only Middle School for the entire hamlet) had to discontinue studies for they could not bear their comments. The ones who had to travel all their way from Kunan to High School in Heeri and then Trehgam covering 10 –15 kms to attend the higher secondary school, too were forced to give up studies after the incident.

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"In the bus, the people would raise fingers on them telling them on their face that they were rape victims, even if they were not among the ones who were raped. So, most of them discontinued studies," informed Abdul Khaliq.

"If only these girls were educated, they would have some better chances in the marriage market. But they were not educated, they quit their studies, their parents had no adequate money to get their married off, on the top of it the stigma of hailing from Kunan couldn't leave them. People would refuse their boys' hands for Kunan girls. The result is that most of the girls are unmarried and uneducated in Kunan Poshpora.

Abdul Khaliq explained about all these problems being faced by Kunan-Poshpora. "These things are self explanatory in Kashmiri society. This was such a heinous incident. So obviously, social stigma was attached to it. The villagers faced marriage problems in all these years. Things worsened as they were not educated, had no jobs either."

The villagers are fed up with the NGOs, media persons, human rights activists and others who visited them and made promises which were never fulfilled. "We were told that we would be helped. Our girls would be rehabilitated. So many promises were made to our daughters and us but none of these were fulfilled. Our girls are unmarried till now," said Khaira Begum.

Nobody, not even their elected representatives have done anything for the betterment of the girls of the village. Only Dilafroze Qazi, a woman in Srinagar who runs SSM College of Engineering in Parihaspora, Pattan opened a Public School for the girls of the area. Started few years ago, the school which is being run free for the Kunan residents has 43 students on roll. Besides setting up this school for girls, she has also opened a self-help group for young women where they learn embroidery. Otherwise, Kunan Poshpora perhaps does not exist for the rest.

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Unconventional lives

Long ago before the violence erupted in Kashmir, Haseena Bano lived with her parents in a peaceful, picturesque village of Wangama in South Kashmir district of Anantnag. Times were peaceful and so were the days which she would partly spend by attending a nearby school and then lending a helping hand to her mother in the household chores while father Ghulam Nabi Shiekh would remain busy in his postal department job. But as the destiny had it, Haseena's mother died young and her father became so protected about her that he made her discontinue her studies.

A few years later, a young Haseena was married off to Mohammed Amin Shah, a carpenter by profession in Zalangam village of Tehsil Kokernag in block Vailoo. Though her dreamy eyes had weaved a number of dreams about her married life, things weren't that better as she had envisaged. The newly married couple had to live from hand to mouth within their limited income. While her husband would go out to work in people's houses, Haseena would take care of the household. But her family could not remain untouched by the winds of change that were blowing across the state in early 90's. Amin Shah quit his work, picked up the gun, joined the *"tehreek"* (freedom movement) and become one of the cadres of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen militant outfit.

Life could never remain same for Haseena thereafter. Her husband was killed by the security forces in Ashajipora in 1996 leaving her to fend for herself and their kids. Heavens seemed to have fallen on Haseena who had not even ventured out of her house without a male member, not to talk of going out to eke out a living for her family. From a sheltered life, she was suddenly exposed to the vagaries of life.

Years later, Haseena is not only earning a livelihood for her family but is determined to give good education to her only

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daughter. For hours she works on crewel embroidery in local Social Welfare centre in Zalangam besides managing the entire household right from buying ration, grocery, schooling of her daughter Raeesa, 14 and attending to other household chores. Sadly, her son Parvez Ahmed, 16, had to quit his studies after Class 8th due to economic conditions.

"But I want my daughter Raeesa to study hard, she is in class 9th and I would do anything for her to continue education," says the mother as tears well up in her eyes.

Haseena is among hundreds of such women in Kashmir who were forced to come out of their houses and earn a livelihood for themselves as their husbands had either been killed by the security forces, militants or simply caught in the crossfire.

Hundreds and thousands of widows and half widows (the women whose husbands have been missing for long but they haven't been declared as dead) in Kashmir are trying to sustain their families in the conflict-hit region. As such, women of valley are deeply affected either directly or indirectly by the continuing conflict in Jammu and Kashmir.

Such Kashmiri women who have come out of their houses to work have broken the stereotypes related to women, especially in the background that they had no work experience and were forced to support their families and thus take over the role of a patriarch. Despite the adversities, the conflict has a somewhat empowering impact on Kashmiri women. It has provided them a space to resist, negotiate, cope and survive.

Many ordinary Kashmiri women who have been affected by militancy- their fathers, husbands, sons having been lost to the violence- but after coming out of the initial shock and mourning, have taken up new roles. One among them is Shehzada Yusuf Begum who too has also survived the most challenging situations after her husband's death.

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When a young and beautiful Shehzada married Idrees Khan, he was already a militant with Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF).A right hand man of JKLF chief Yaseen Malik, Idrees was killed in 1995 leaving behind his wife and two daughters.

"My husband sacrificed his life for Yasin Malik and the party did not do anything for us," rues Shehzada informing that things were really bad after the killing of her husband Idrees as she and her two young daughters, now 9 and 12 year old, were thrown out of the house by her in-laws. With nobody to look her after, Shehzada who got exposed to this ruthless world, also wore shields of insensitivity and worked for the betterment of her kids.

With her daughters now studying in class 8th and 6th and she herself working in the MNWA women welfare centre, Darishkadal (a centre opened for the destitute women by a Kashmir based NGO Maqbool National Welfare Association run by Mr. Hashim Qureshi), where she teaches young Kashmiri girls stitching and tailoring; things seem to have fallen in place.

Kashmir valley is full of such examples of women who have survived the most difficult situations alone in all these years of turbulence. And as Kashmir observers say, it has given them some kind of supremacy too.

"Kashmiri women have not only lived through political turbulence but have also negotiated and renegotiated their roles in the conflict that also does not remain static but keeps on changing. That becomes loudly clear when we see that most of these women became victims of militancy- lost their husbands, brothers, sons, raped and tortured, still came out of their houses to work thus breaking the stereotypes related to women, especially in the background that they had no work experience and were forced to support their families and thus take over

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the role of a head of the family," says Rekha Chowdhary, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Jammu.

This also gives an insight into the fact that they aren't the passive recipients of conflict as most of the agencies see them but have an inborn, innate resilience, the will to survive the most challenging situations.

Ghulshan Bano, 22, too has survived the worst situations. A resident of Vilgam, a small village situated some 20 km from Kupwara district, one of her brothers Farooq Ahmed was killed in the initial years of militancy while another one was forced by the Hizbul Mujahideen to join their ranks. He too got killed in 1997.

Things became worse after their killings as there was no bread-earner left in the family. Ghulshan Bano donned the role of patriarch, got her trained in stitching-tailoring and now she earns Rs 1000 per month. The money is just enough to sustain the family and educate her younger sister Rubeena in the Government Higher Secondary school in Kupwara.

Kulsooma Jan's story is somehow similar. Her father Abdul Jabbar Dar, district President of Congress in Kupwara was killed by the militants in 1996 during the peak of militancy. Perhaps, this was the reason that not a single member from the party visited Dar's family of a handicap wife and her five daughters.

"My father served the Congress for 30-35 years. We did not get any ex-gratia relief after his killing. There was no job, no help from any quarters," says Kulsooma Jan who has studied up to class 12th. Out of the five sisters, Nusrat and Ameena are now married while she herself looks after her young siblings Saima and Iqra (who is in class 2nd).

Though the pain and agony suffered by these women is tremendous, yet these women's strength of character is clearly

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visible from the various difficult situations that they got confronted with.

What is more interesting is the fact that Kashmiri women who might have supported the "Mujahids" at some point of time in the past two decades of violence, are now invariably emerging as agent of peace.

"Tehreek Nein Humko Kya Diya, Tabaahi Aur Barbadi (This freedom movement did not get us anything but destruction and devastation)," says Shehzada Yusuf adding after all these years, peace is very important to her. Peace to her is a life with dignity and honour for her two daughters where there is no bloodshed and violence.

Such statements from the women victims of violence is a clear insight into the fact that they aren't the passive recipients of conflict as most of the agencies see them but have an inborn, innate resilience, the will to survive.

"The donning of the role of a mother and father both in the conflict zones gives some supremacy to the women who have learnt to survive against existing odds. Besides, there is an increase in women's adaptability to new challenging situations," says Professor Bashir Dabla, a well known sociologist of Kashmir.

And perhaps this yearning for peace is a big turning point in Kashmir. Now, these victims of militancy fervently hope that peace on the borders will extend to their villages, towns and homes. For most of them, peace begins with their immediate family and extends to cover the whole region, country and the world.

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Unabated terror, scarred lives

Young, beautiful and educated. That is how the shell-shocked

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residents of Doda, a militancy-hit district of Jammu and Kashmir describe Shama Begum who met with a tragic end on 2nd December 2006 when a terrorist trying to escape the security forces cordon, threw her down a cliff leading to her death in the terrorism-hit region.

Shama, 24, hailed from an educated family of Doda in Jammu province; her father was a Forest Range Officer, a post considered important in the militancy-infested district. Having been brought up in a good family, she always dreamt of a nice life with a loving husband and her family. Nobody could think about the fate that this young girl met with recently.

A young Shama, resident of Asiri in Doda was being followed and pestered by a terrorist Javed Iqbal alias Jeeshan belonging to Hizul Mujahideen militant outfit to give in to his desires since past two years. The girl who bravely resisted his advances for long, had to ultimately succumb to him following the dreaded terrorist's threat to eliminate her entire family if she didn't yield to him. Forcibly raped for nearly two months, she was thrown off a cliff by Javed Iqbal to divert the attention of security forces. Thus, the young beautiful girl who aspired for a beautiful life with her loved ones met with a tragic end.

Since the inception of insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, there has been no let up in incidents of terrorists forcing themselves upon the 'beautiful' girls. There has been an increase in such kind of atrocities on girls in the recent times, especially in Doda. Girls are forced to marry terrorists, gun-totting illiterate youth and even people twice their age. Many of these marriages have lead to divorces, torture-killing of women and desertions. After satisfying their lust, the terrorists leave the hapless girls at the mercy of the society to lead a life of humiliation and dishonor.

In the initial years of turmoil, when insurgency started in Jammu and Kashmir, the Kashmiri families sympathized with the "Mujahideen" (guest fighters) who were fighting for "the

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cause of Kashmir's liberation" from India and its merger with Pakistan. Donning Che Guevara image, parents of many girls even married off their daughters to these 'militants'. One Riffat Kar who was considered as one of the most beautiful girls of Baramulla town and belonged to a respectable family of advocates, married a militant. A number of such 'Nikahs' or marriages took place in which number of girls got married to the militants. However, the girls and their parents soon realized to their shock that the foreign terrorists had come only for two year tenure of Jihad. They simply vanished or got killed leaving the Kashmiri girls with fatherless children and unwanted pregnancies. Thereafter the euphoria started dying down and the parents and the girls did realize that such marriages would get them nothing but destruction. Hence the resistance to such marriages.

However, many women were then forced to unwilling marriages. In Mahore tehsil situated in Pir Panjal range, there were 65 forced marriages in the year 1999 following which the parents in the area, started marrying off their daughters very early to save them from the clutches of the militants. In few cases, the parents had to shift their daughters from Kashmir to save them from such forced marriages. Hundreds of girls/ women kidnapped by the militants simply disappeared. Many got pregnant and were abandoned by their tormentors.

Things are far from better even now. Women are still undergoing the worst form of torture and trauma. Molestation and rape have become a regular pattern with the acquittal of perpetrators reflecting endorsement of the crimes.

In Doda district only, two years ago four young women - Munira Bano, Naseera Bano, Naseema Begum and Shabina Begum hailing from village Chinyas of Gandoh tehsil were abducted by some unidentified terrorists while tending their cattle in the pastures of the upper reaches of the hilly district. Physically assaulted, blamed as informers of the security forces,

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tortured, beaten and molested, their heads were tonsured as the terrorists "wanted to set an example".

More recently, in the past couple of months, many such cases have surfaced in Doda where the terrorists are forcing the girls to comfort them. The people in these villages who have now begun to resist are the vulnerable lot as the gun-toting militants are using weapons to rape or kidnap the girls. This philandering of the foreign terrorists has put the very fabric of society under tremendous stress and strain.

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'Jihad' over a village belle

Foreign Terrorists (FT) versus local terrorists! That too over a beautiful village belle!! Unbelievable but true. Unlike all these years when most of the militant groups had coordinated operations in the entire militancy infested state, in a significant development, a virtual war erupted between the two major militant groups Lashkar- e- Toiba and Hizbul Mujahideen in the far off heavily inaccessible Marwah-Warwan areas of Kishtwar tehsil. Astonishingly, the war between these two powerful militant groups erupted over a beautiful local village belle, incidentally granddaughter of the local MLC. These inter-group clashes left six Hizbul men dead who were severely tortured by the Lashkar men besides the elimination of a top LeT commander.

Situated in far off belt of Doda district, Marwah-Warwan areas which can only be reached by a helicopter and were initially considered as "liberated zones" as militants had a free time here, the clashes between the LeT and HM triggered off over the grand-daughter of Khawaja Abdul Aziz, the local MLC (Member Legislative Council).

"Lashkar Commander Faidullah, a Pakistani wanted to marry MLC's beautiful grand-daughter but the local Hizbul

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Mujahideen terrorists resisted. Resulting this, a major armed clash occurred between the Lashkar and HM militants in Marwah-Warwan area. Besides this girl, the other causes of friction were over the recruitment of locals, treatment of other Kashmiri women by the Pakistan terrorists and torture and high-handedness against the locals. The dispute had been simmering for months before it exploded in the shootout in which six HM men and one Lashkar cadre were killed.

The trend of foreign terrorists infiltrated into the state of Jammu and Kashmir was witnessed in mid nineties. It is also an open secret that these foreign ultras were infiltrated into the State of Jammu and Kashmir on the pretext of waging a holy war in the state and also by telling them that if they would be "martyred" in the "Jihad", they would go to the heaven (*Jannat*) and would get fairies (*Hoor*).

Seething with rage, the HM cadres who raised an outcry for revenge, however had to stay put for the HM supremo Syed Salahuddin, currently in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, intervened prevailing upon his cadres not to react .Syed Salahuddin had even assured his simmering cadres that those LeT cadres responsible for the shootout in which six HM men lost their lives, would be ordered to undertake Fidayeen attacks as a punishment. However nothing of the sort happened. Patience of HM cadres in the district was running out and thus they revolted against their boss Salahuddin. The HM Divisional Commander Abbas Rahi ordered his Deputy District Commander Wasim Malik to execute the killing of those LeT ultras led by Faidullah.

Lashkar's Pakistani commander Faidullah who was injured in an exchange of fire between the security forces and the LeT cadres in Marwah area, went to Apan village along with his two colleagues for treatment and convalescence when HM got wind of his stay in the village. Wasim Malik alias Ubeida of HM went to the village and shot dead the wounded Lashkar

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commander Faidullah.

Though these foreign ultras or *Mehman Mujahideen* (guest fighters) like Faidullah had the support of locals to some extend initially, however, the support is also on the decline and there is a strong rift between the local and foreign terrorists on the issue of treatment to the women folk in the state.

Strong resentment is brewing up among the local militants against the increasing acts of sexual assaults by the foreign terrorists on the Kashmiri and other local girls. Another such incident of sexual exploitation of Kashmiri women on the hands of foreign ultras has further widened the differences between the local and the foreign terrorists. A local militant Usman Bhai alias Bomber Khan of Doda, belonging to Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist outfit who dared to oppose the humiliating act of his foreign associates on a local girl of Manjakot in Rajouri, was torched recently and later gunned down mercilessly.

It so happened that some villagers of Gambhir area in Manjakot, Rajouri saw a bullet-ridden body wearing severe marks of torture from a Dhok in Gambhir area of Manjakot in Rajouri. They informed Manjakot police which rushed to the spot and took the body in their possession. Later, the deceased was identified as Usman alias Bomber Khan of Doda. The post-mortem report revealed that Usman had died due to burst of bullets fired on him from close range. His body bore marks of extreme torture that included breaking of his bones. Since no encounter in the adjoining area had taken place in the past few days, the police and investigating authorities were at their wits end with regard to the circumstances under which Usman had died. Further investigations and questioning of some local villagers of the area revealed the gory tale of barbarism and treachery unleashed by the foreign militants.

The disclosure was startling. Three foreign militants used to sexually abuse a local girl Shaheen, daughter of Munir Hussain.

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Usman being local felt deeply humiliated as he was made to stand outside while the trio used to rape the girl at gun point. Touched by her tender age and screams for mercy, Usman fought with the terrorists violently. Thereafter, the trio bounced back confined him inside a nearby dhok in the jungle and tortured for two days and then gunned down. He had expressed his wish to surrender and not to work for the outfit.

Such incidents have started disillusioning the residual militants who are giving up guns now after seeing the reality. Most of the local terrorists who had got into the militancy for fighting a "Jihad" have clearly understood that there is nothing like a holy war in Kashmir and that they were being misled by the people sitting across the border. The treatment rendered out to their daughters, mother and other female relatives has not been tolerated by the men in the troubled region. Resulting this, a sharp divide has surfaced among various foreign and local groups who are at daggers drawn with each other. This has also given rise to some frustration to their mentors sitting across the border.

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Trampled by rapists

From the thick forests of Doda, the foreign terrorists abducted young Marium Begum for no fault of hers. Perhaps her only crime was that she was the sister of Abdul Latif, a local terrorist belonging to militant outfit Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) who had surrendered before the security forces. Latif had became disenchanted with militancy and decided to give up arms. He surrendered with an expensive Pika Rifle but the terrorists wouldn't let him go so easily. To avenge his surrender, they abducted his innocent little sister Marium along with her father Abdul Mohammed Ibrahim from Mehad Dhar in Doda where they were grazing their cattle. What followed was a horrible nightmare. Not only both were beaten with rifle butts and sticks

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and burnt with cigarettes, they were also subjected to cold-blooded torture. They accused them of motivating Latif to surrender and of being a *"Mukhbir"* or informer.

Such was the brutality on their part that the district terrorist commander's instructions were spine chilling. "Don't shoot them, torture them till they die," he said. As the forces were on their look out, during one of the massive search operations, father Mohd Irbrahim escaped but the ultras managed to carry the hapless girl with them.

After giving vent to their devilish passion for 25 days, they mercilessly cut off her ears and nose and left her to die in the Jungle. By sheer providence, an army patrol that was on the lookout for these terrorists, heard Marium's screams and found her in a most pathetic condition awaiting her death. Found by the forces in semi-conscious conditions, her whole body bore the marks of severe torture. Rushed to the Government Hospital Doda, Marium's life was however saved and she was later admitted to Government Medical Hospital, Jammu for reconstructive surgery.

After months of medical treatment, Marium's plastic surgery started for the reconstruction of the tip of her nose, complete right ear and 80% of her left ear which was brutally chopped off by the terrorists. Thanks to the Army and the J&K Police, the J&K police took on the responsibility of her initial treatment and in a most humane gesture gave financial and moral support to the girl and her family. Since the medical bill was on the rise, the Army also joined in the cause of helping young Marium pick up the threads of her shattered life all over again.

In the Northern Command army hospital, surgeons took up the first stage of ear reconstruction in an operation lasting for about six hours. It involved taking out some of her chest cartilage from the left side, carving it into the shape of the deficient ears on either side (to form a firm baseline structure)

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and then burying it under the normal adjacent skin. The next stage of surgery involving lifting up of the new ear was done after 4-5 months at the Command Hospital itself.

In the past 20 years of violence and bloodshed in Jammu and Kashmir, there have been numerous instances when those women who did not help the militants as their couriers were sexually exploited and disfigured. Their ears, nose or tongue cut and then even killed in many cases. This was only an account of those women whose kiths and kins dared to bring it to the notice of the authorities. There are many, who out of fear of retribution by the militants do not even talk about the ignominy suffered.

"Women who are the soft target in conflict situation, face sexual and physical violence both by the security forces and militants," says Professor Bashir Dabla, renowned sociologist of Kashmir adding that undoubtedly, the ongoing conflict has left a huge scar on the Kashmiri psyche, particularly female survivors.

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Tragedy of two Kashmirs

Mubin, 6, is chattering non-stop since past two days. Her big beautiful eyes, her infectious smile and her innocent queries have charmed everybody in the household of advocate A.K.Sawhney where this India-born girl has been putting up with her Pakistani mother Shehnaz Parveeen Kousar for the past two days since their release from the Jammu District jail after seven long years.

Born and brought up in various jails in the border district of Rajouri situated near the Line of Control (LoC) and then in Jammu, Mubin cannot stop wondering as to why she is not staying in a small dark dingy cell. The young girl hasn't seen anything but the four walls of the District Jail, Jammu also known as Amphalla Jail located in the heart of Old Jammu

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City since she was born.

A dream shines in her eyes as she tastes freedom for the first time in her six years, refuses to go back to the Jail when asked if she would like to go there. *"Jail Ganda Hota hai"* (Jail is a dirty place), replies the girl flatly and start laughing.....*Yeh Kya Hai* (What is this?), *Woh Kya hai* (what is that?).....To her endless queries, the Sawhney family replies with much poise and patience for the young girl has become too attached to the family including the two sons of advocate Sawhney especially Aseem, the elder one who himself is an advocate. Infact, Aseem only had later filed a PIL for their release from the jail.

Mubin and her mother Parveen Kousar who hails from Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir were recently freed by the Jammu and Kashmir High Court in a landmark judgment when a Division Bench of Jammu and Kashmir High Court ordered release of Parveen alias Shehnaz, a Pakistani national, arrested in 1995 and jailed since then along with her six year-old daughter born in Jammu prison.

Just outside the house of advocate Sawhney who has given a temporary shelter to the mother-daughter duo, Mubin even springs more surprises to me by saying that she would have all the toffees in the shop where I take her to buy her some condiments as she has rarely seen and eaten any. Nobody would come to meet the mother-daughter duo in the jail during all these seven traumatic years.

Mubin's mother Parveen Kousar of village Abbowalla in Azad Kashmir (PoK), tehsil Kotli, Mirpur was married to Mohammad Younis of Village Ambdewalla in tehsil Bhimber of Barnala. Parveen says she had been married only for three months to Mohammed Yunis when she decided to end her life. Denying that she was ill treated by her husband or her in-laws, she says she was under tremendous depression and just wanted to end her life.

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During one of her usual bouts of depression, one day she went to the Pandori Dariya near her village, the river that divides Poonch into Indian and PoK territories and enters Poonch-Rajouri from Pakistan, and jumped into the river. But destiny had something else in store for her. *"Madam ji, Mere Naseeb Ch Kuch Our Hi Tha,"* she speaks in her Pahari-Punjabi dialect spoken in most of the border villages of India and Pakistan. After she jumped into the river, she, however, was swept to Indian side, picked up by the security forces in Laam sector of Poonch-Rajoui on 6 October, 1995 and stayed in army hospital for three days. Then she was taken for interrogation as forces were apprehensive that she could be a Pakistani spy. But after fully investigating that she wasn't a spy, she was handed over to the police in Poonch that registered a case under section 2/3 Ingress and International Movement (Control) Ordinance. She was sent to judicial custody for trial and eventually sentenced on 15 November 1995 to undergo one year imprisonment with a fine of Rupees 500 for entering the country illegally.

"Under the Passport Act, the judge could maximum give her punishment for one year. Besides, as she could not pay a fine of Rs 500 along with this one year punishment, thus her sentence was increased to three more months," informs Mr. Sawhney adding that except for all these 15 months in Jammu jails, rest of her detention period was totally illegal and state government is responsible for it.

Incidentally, during her detention, her life was to change forever. She was raped by one Mohammed Din, the Jail Warden of Poonch district Jail. She could not muster enough courage and tell anybody about the rape. However, during the bi- monthly health checkups of jail-inmates, the doctors found that she was pregnant. Though her jail mates and some of the authorities suggested her abortion, she decided against it. An investigation was launched by the then Additional Director General of Prisons Mr. Veerana Aivilli who held the inquiry and a case got

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registered against the jail warden for raping the Pakistani women. However, the warden who had in person confessed that he had raped Parveen, later denied when his challan was produced in the court. He is still undergoing trial in the court

Meanwhile, in a hush-hush manner, Parveen was shifted to Jammu District Jail without the knowledge of higher ups. Here only, she gave birth to her baby girl Mubin in Nari Niketan, Jammu, on October 6, 1996. After she completed her jail term, she was shifted to a Nari Niketan on January 8, 1997. She remained there till August 8, 2000 when authorities shifted her once again to the Jammu's Central Jail.

Though few people and organizations had been fighting for the release of Parveen, yet nobody had seriously pursued her case the way Mr. Sawhney did. The man who also runs an English daily "Journeyline" from Jammu, and is also a leading lawyer, was interested to know about her after reading her story in one of the newspapers. As he started taking interest in the developments related to her case, he was greatly moved to learn that the lady was under illegal detention for all these years despite the fact that she had already completed her punishment for 15 months.

Immediately, he decided to take up cudgels on her behalf, went to meet her, talked to her, asked if she would be happy if she could be out of the jail and can make a future for her and her small daughter outside the four walls of the jail. Parveen simply couldn't believe that she would be out of the prison as she had lost hope during all these years. After acquiring her consent, Mr. Sawhney who laid his hand on this extraordinary case, worked non-stop finding clues, conducting this own investigations, trying to locate papers of her detention etc. Ultimately he succeeded after three months of hard work when Parveen and Mubin were released by the Court.

In this much publicized case of the illegal detention of this

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Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) woman and her six year old minor daughter conceived during detention, the Division Bench of the State High Court comprising Justice T S Doabia and Justice S K Gupta not only ordered the release of both mother and daughter but also ordered the State to pay a sum of rupees three lakh as compensation to be deposited in the name of her minor daughter. The interest out of this amount would be spent on the welfare of the minor, the DB said, while ordering that the State would be at liberty to recover this amount from Din Mohammed, Jail Warden, if he is ultimately found to be the person responsible for the illegal act of impregnating her. "Otherwise, as the State is equally liable for the illegal act of its servant, the State is burdened with the damages", the DB directed.

Regarding their stay, the bench directed that the minor be allowed to stay in India for as long as she herself wants to and till she is accepted by the Pakistani authorities. For their accommodation, it was directed that an accommodation be made available in an area meant for police or jail staff so that the authorities could remain in constant touch with them to take care of their welfare.

"If you are talking about taking PoK areas back and resettling the people of PoK to Jammu and Kashmir again, then why couldn't you resettle or rehabilitate a young lady who is just 32 and has spent seven springs of her life in dark dingy walls of prison," questions Sawhney. What really pains this sensitive lawyer is also the fact that not a single women's organizations (Jammu has plenty of them) or human rights groups could come to her help even after she was released from the Jail.

Even as three days have passed since her release from jail, not a single NGO has approached her. Immediately after their release as Mubin and her mother had nowhere to go (Court has directed to grant her compensation within 15 days including the house), Mr. Sawhney had to bring her home with the

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consent of her wife who is equally understanding.

"Are they (state government) waiting that these 15 days should pass and only then they would grant a meager amount of Rs 3 lakh to her as compensation for her child's upbringing and would allot her a small house?" says an angry Sawhney adding that the state government spent over Rs 3 lakh on this case on the expenditure of its counsels but did not think about the sufferings of this lady.

In these past few years, BSF tried once to send Parveen to Pakistan. She was actually driven to Wagha border in Punjab but the Pakistani Rangers refused to take her daughter saying she was an Indian citizen. She was the only one of the six Pakistanis who returned from Wagha. "Pakistanis has no problems letting her into the country, but not her daughter Mubin who, by birth, is an Indian citizen," says Sawhney. Ironically, as she was not accepted by Pakistan along with her Indian-born daughter, the then DIG Jammu wrote to SHO R.S.Pura to arrest her under Public Safety Act, in contradiction to its previous charges. She was again arrested and kept in jail till recently.

Ironically, she has no contact with her family on the other side of the LoC. They used to send her letters initially, but all communication stopped gradually. She has not been getting any mails from her Saudi Arabia-based brother Mohammed Yousuf, whom she had earlier sent tape-recorded messages. But she wants to go once to her native place, meet her maternal family and return back to Jammu.

Meanwhile, a case stands registered under section 376 RPC against Mohammed Din, Jail Warden in Nowshera court of Rajouri district. The trial is on. There was some delay as some revision petition came to be filed in the High Court. The proceedings arouse because a need was felt to have DNA test of the accused Jail Warden so that the relationship with the

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minor could be determined. Recently, the court has directed that Mubin and Din be tested for their DNA to establish their parentage. Parveen wants Din to accept the fatherhood of her daughter.

Parveen Kousar alias Shehnaz symbolises the tragedy that two halves of Kashmir continue to endure since partition.

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At last, the long wait ends

For all these months after her release from a J&K prison after seven long years, not a single day passed when Shehnaz Parveen Kouser did not dream of returning to her native place in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and be among her loved ones. But scared she was as she was already once sent back from Wagha Border in June 2001. That year, the Pakistani authorities though agreed to take her back, they however refused to accept her Indian illegitimate girl child Mubin who was a result of Shehnaz's rape in Rajouri jail. She was left with no choice but to spend her rest of the days in the dark, dingy cells of Central Jail, Jammu.

Having already spent her seven years in the various jails of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, all she wanted freedom and a better life for her daughter who too was born in the jail and hadn't seen anything. And then A.K.Sawhney, the leading advocate of the State who was moved to hear the plight of the Pakistani lady who, in a fit of anger, had jumped into a small Nullah in Pakistan to commit suicide but unfortunately found herself on Indian side, came to her rescue. Arrested, put in the jail and later raped by the jail warden, Shehnaz's story moved Sawhney to this extent that he decided to get her freedom. Not only she and her young daughter tasted freedom when they were released by the J&K High Court in August 2001 as Sawhney won the case, but the man whom Shehnaz calls "Messiah", also made it possible for her return to her maternal

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village Hariyan Ka Bagh, situated just across Indian district of Poonch in Pak-occupied-Kashmir.

Shehnaz, 35, and her 8-year old daughter Mubin crossed Wagah border recently. Received at the border by her two brothers, she was taken to Lahore and the next day she reached her village safely. After eight long years, she was welcomed by her parents' family. Shehnaz has mother-father, five sisters and five brothers and one of her brothers Mohd Yusuf, is working in Saudi Arabia. Her husband Mohd Yunus (to whom she was married only for three months) and his family also live in the same village. But so far, they haven't reacted to her return from India after so many years.

"When I took up her case on philanthropic grounds, my aim was to set her and her innocent daughter who hadn't seen the outer world, free. After I achieved that, I wanted to reunite with her family. And that has also been made possible. Now remains the question of her rehabilitation and the acceptance of her Indian daughter Mubin who unfortunately is illegitimate child," says Mr. Sawhney.

In fact, Sawhney who worked hard for her release, feels that for him, Shehnaz's return to Pakistan was much bigger a challenge for him than her rehabilitation. For this he had to struggle a lot. Her return to her country ultimately became possible with the help of Pakistan Human Rights Commission chairman Mr. Rao Abid Hamid who continuously remained in touch with him over this issue. In fact, the Pakistan Human Right Commission, after learning about the plight of the Pakistani woman living in Jammu and Kashmir with her young daughter, had become quite active and took up her case with the Pakistani authorities.

"On 26 June 2001, her repatriation had failed. The laws were the same, the rules and regulations were the same and the persons were the same," says Sawhney adding that her return

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to her country got accelerated due to the present peace initiatives. The process of the return of mother-daughter duo which took off in September 2003, culminated successfully now .While Pakistan Human Rights Commission took up her case with their government, on Indian side, both the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry for External Affairs got involved in her case and pursued their return with the diplomatic channels in Pakistan High Commission.

"The return of Shehnaz and Mubin and their rehabilitation seemed very difficult as the Islamic laws are very rigid in Pakistan," informs Sawhney who also took up Shehnaz's case through his writings in his English daily newspaper "Journey-line" which he owns. Shehnaz who had jumped into the Nullah to end her life could be punished under Pakistani laws for homicide. And her Indian daughter Mubin too would have not been accepted by them.

However, not only the peace initiatives by both India and Pakistan paved way for her return, but Mr. Sawhney also succeeded in getting in writing from Pakistani government through the Pakistan Human Rights Commission that a general amnesty would be granted to her and her daughter Mubin who would be granted Pakistani citizenship which would help in her rehabilitation in Pakistan. In this much publicized case, the Pakistan Human rights Commission acted as the guarantor and thus played the major role.

Informs Sawhney: "This is perhaps for the first time in the history of Pakistan that an illegitimate child born in India has been granted Pakistani citizenship. This is quite a big achievement for me." Sawhney admits that he himself wasn't sure whether Mubin would be granted Pak citizenship.

Asked about Shehnaz's rehabilitation, Sawhney informs that just before she left for Pakistan, she herself was quite disturbed for many days, despite the fact that she had started talking to

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her brothers (courtesy PHRC) on phone in his house who used to assure her that she would be welcomed in their household again. But Shehnaz had more apprehensions- if they wouldn't really accept her, if they would treat her and her child well, and if something bad happens....? But one thing she was quite sure of, if she would have to work for her daughter, she would do that, and she would even remarry for the sake of her daughter if her in-laws would not accept her.

"She wants to provide the best to her daughter," says Mr. Sawhney expressing optimism that her in-laws would also accept her. After all, she was not to be blamed. Though some religious preachers in Pakistan are uncomfortable with her return to Pakistan with her India-born illegitimate daughter, yet Mr. Sawhney is quite hopeful that she would get adjusted to the surrounding and would rehabilitate herself totally for the sake of her daughter.

As they say truth is really stranger than fiction and nothing can exemplify it more than Shehnaz's tale of agony and a succor that she received at the hands of Sawhney in an "enemy country".

From Onion to relationships, Mubin recognizes the worth in human lives

Shehnaz's return to Pakistan indeed was an emotional journey but for her young daughter Mubin who has spent seven years of her life in the inhospitable environs of prison unaware about her father and her nationality, Pakistan is a new country. Till now, she just knew that her mother used to live in Pakistan and her relatives are still in that country.

Born in a dark room of a jail, Mubin tasted freedom for the first time in August 2002 when Mr. A.K.Sawhney, advocate got both the mother and daughter out of the prison. As they had no place to go, both mother-daughter stayed in Sawhney household for quite some time before they moved to the

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government accommodation which was provided to them on the directions of the J&K High Court. But for all these months, when she stayed in their house, Mubin became a darling of the family.

Assem Sawhney, son of Mr. Sawhney who himself is and advocate and assisted his father in this case, recalls: " Mubin hadn't seen anything in the jail. After all she was born in the prison only. She would see onion and potatoes and would ask my mother what is this? She was full of queries as she hardly had seen anything. They were provided readymade food in the prison; she hadn't see these small little things." But slowly and gradually she started knowing about the worth in life, the things around her and the value of relationships. She got much affection from the Sawhney family and returned the same in full measure. With their return to Pakistan, Sawhney family feels as if a part of their family is gone.

As Mr. Sawhney puts it: "The little girl who couldn't recognize vegetables after her release from the jail, today has undergone much transformation. She has come to recognize the value of her relationships. From onion to her maternal uncle, the transformation is tremendous. She knew that she was going to Pakistan to her Mamu. That is significance of relations."

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Traumatized seldom speak

For all these years, Brackpora has come to be associated with the infamous Pathribal killings which took place after Chittsinghpora massacre in 2001. In this village situated in Anantnag district of Southern Kashmir lives Somya Rashid, 22, whose personal monumental tragedy has entered its tenth year. Not a single day has past in her life in this past decade when she has had a sound sleep without headaches and nightmares.

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Ten years ago, Somya's father Abdul Rashid Mir, a teacher with Hazrat Aamir Kabeer School in Anantnag was killed before her eyes, allegedly by the surrendered militants. Her screams, shrieks and cries horrified the people that day including her five siblings but never thereafter. Since then her tears have dried up and the trauma and pain that she went through, has got frozen inside her heart. She hasn't shed even a single tear nor has she smiled since that fateful day which changed her entire life. All her dreams that her father had woven around her young girl, died with his death. The young girl, who wanted to become a doctor, was forced to quit her studies and sit at home.

A decade later, Somya now clearly shows the symptoms of severe depression. She doesn't sleep properly. The fear of somebody coming and spraying a volley of bullets into her body and her siblings keeps her awake most of the time. Headaches and nightmares have become common for her. Strangely, she is least aware about the state of her mental health.

But hers is not an isolated case in Kashmir. In these two decades, hundreds of such cases have surfaced in rural Kashmir. Be it Anantnag, Budgam, Pulwama or the border district of Kupwara, women here not only suffer from severe depression but also suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). Stress, trauma, depression have become common in the lives of the Kashmiri women. But strange is the fact that most of these women are not aware about the state of their mental health in rural Kashmir, though they complain of headaches, sleep-related disorders, high blood pressure, anxiety, fear of unknown, fear of security forces and militants, physical insecurity etc.

The conflict has created a situation of tremendous fear and uncertainty in the lives of women in Kashmir. Sociologists say that it is a direct consequence of the conflict situation prevailing in the Himalayan state for the past 20 years. The armed conflict

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in Kashmir, which started in 1989 between the militants and security forces, trapped every group, class and community. Years of strife have taken a toll on the inhabitants, but the worst sufferers have been Kashmiri women who are the soft targets. They have suffered from violence by the terrorists and security forces on the psychological and emotional front too.

Take the case of two sisters Adfar Jan, 13 and Nighat Jan, 15 who live in Astaan Mohalla, Natipora, Srinagar. The girls who study in class 8th and class 9th respectively in Government Higher Secondary School Chanpora in Srinagar, continuously live in fear and don't mingle even their class fellows. Having seen their father getting killed by unidentified gunman few years ago, the sisters don't talk much, go to the school and come back to their small home straightway. Both complain of continuous palpitation and even don't feel like talking to anybody. Their poor mother, who has to take care of six children, fails to understand the symptoms of their acute depression.

Depression, in fact, is more rampant among girls in rural areas. Education of girls suffered during the turmoil as their parents' security concerns for their girls going to school/college led to these girls being withdrawn from these educational institutions. "Almost 65 per cent of the girls in the initial years of turmoil were forced to quit their studies due to abnormal conditions prevailing in valley," says Prof Bashir Ahmed Dabla, leading sociologist of Kashmir.

Many girls quit their studies after their fathers' killings as they had no known financial assistance and were facing poverty. Somya Rashid was one among such hundreds of girls living in entire length and breadth of Kashmir. As their mothers were forced to go out for earning, they had to sit at home and take care of their sibling, attend to the household chores and other things. The girls who wanted to study and stand on their own feet, could not fulfill their aims. Slowly and gradually, they drifted into depression. Girls suffered mentally on other counts

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too. Forced by the circumstances created by the conflict, few young girls who are forced to live apart from their mothers or immediate families have also shown strange behaviors as happened with Shakeela's daughter.

Shakeela's husband Abdul Rashid Dar, a taxi driver was killed by militants during the peak of militancy in 1992 in Handwara. He was first kidnapped by the terrorists from Handwara bus stand and after 10-15 days, his body strewn with two bullets was found in Handwara. She did not get any ex-gratia relief from the state government as her in-laws wrote a letter to the Tehsildar telling him that they should get the money.

"In this second-most corrupt state in India, everything is possible, so her in-laws got the money," says her father Abdul Khaliq Mir who brought his daughter back to his home in Doolipora, Kupwara as her inlaws wanted her to marry their younger son which she refused. Before returning to her parents' home, her in-laws forced her to keep her daughter with them saying that she was their son's daughter and at least she should keep one of the two children of their son with them. And she was forced to do so. Now, after a gap of 2-3 months, Shakeela goes to meet her 16 year old daughter who, she says, is under tremendous pressure. She does not speak to her properly; talks very less ands tells her mother that she feels suffocated there.

The trauma of such women like Shakeela who are forced to leave their children with grand-parents and their young daughters is too much. Such psychological trauma has destroyed the social fabric in the Valley and has given rise to suicides, in some instances, in Kashmir.

At least three to five suicide cases are registered every week in Srinagar's two main hospitals Sri Maharaja Hari Singh (SMHS) and Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences. The fear, stress, tension and uncertainty prevailing in the state are the main reasons explaining this rise in suicides. In 1998, SMHS

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registered 167 suicide deaths – 92 women and 75 men. In 1999, the total was 208 – 144 women and 64 men. Between April 2000 and March 2001, altogether 567 suicides – 377 women and 190 men – were registered by the hospital. A study in 2002 revealed that among some 10 lakh psychiatric patients, around one lakh were diagnosed with suicidal tendencies. 20 percent of this number does attempt suicide

In the urban or semi urban area so Kashmir valley, at least Kashmiri women have started thronging hospitals but not in rural Kashmir. Women in rural areas find it very difficult to cope up with this situation leading to stress related disorders and thus suffer more than anybody as incident of violence go unreported there and also ignorance and illiteracy being high there. The victims of rape or molestation who are undergoing psychological trauma do not visit the hospital.

Before the violence began there were hardly any women going to psychiatrists. Now, in urban Kashmir, a large number of women are thronging psychiatric hospitals following a spurt in neurological disorders as they have witnessed bloodshed and the killing of their husbands, children, brothers, fathers, and sisters. Most of the women visiting the hospitals suffer from depression, insomnia and stress. Few of them even show post-traumatic stress disorders like recurrent and distressing recollection of events, marked irritability, outbursts of anger, difficulty in concentrating, sleeplessness, depression, and disinterest in social or domestic activities.

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Kashmir's new age disorders

Twenty years ago, when the armed insurgency erupted in Kashmir, the number of people with psychiatric problems was just 1,700 but the ever-increasing figures over these years have worried the health professionals working in Jammu and Kashmir. Over 60,000 people are faced with such health

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disorders in Kashmir and unfortunately the number could be more as very few people come forward and go to the hospitals or consult psychiatrists for their mental health for it is still considered as a taboo. Over 50 percent of these 60,000 people who seek help for mental disorders have been women.

Such revelations were made in a two-day meet organized by WISCOMP -Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace -, an initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of the Dalai Lama. The delegates in the working group on Health and Psycho-social Healing discussed threadbare the problems faced by the people in Jammu and Kashmir and recommended some strong remedial measures.

Faced with conflict for the past 20 years, Kashmir is terribly affected by militancy. The protracted conflict has left its impact on the people's health also. The prolonged insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir is having a severe impact on the mental health of the people, especially women and children. More and more women are knocking on the doors of mental health professionals in the strife-torn state.

Though various mental health problems faced by the people in J&K include depression, post-traumatic stress disorders, sleep problems, general anxiety and mental illness etc, two new health disorders are on the increase in Kashmir. These are 'Emptiness Syndrome' and 'Midnight Knock Syndrome'.

Elaborated Dr. Sabeeha Mufti who teaches at the Department of Mass Communication, University of Kashmir: "Most of the people who belong to the affluent class have sent their kids outside because of the conflict situation. Their children are either aboard or in other Indian states. Such parents are increasingly showing emptiness syndrome which is becoming a mental disorder."

Similar disorders have been seen among the displaced Kashmiri Pandits staying in migrant camps in Jammu. "They

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too are living lonely lives with their kids scattered all over the country in search of livelihood. Now such people sit alone in their homes and are increasingly showing this disorder," said Dr Nirojini Bhat who has worked in migrant camps.

Besides, there is a 'Midnight Knock Syndrome' which is becoming very common among the people in Kashmir. People hallucinate about knocks at their doors. Not only are the numbers growing, the list of disorders is also widening. Apart from psychosomatic disorders such as ulcers, the traumatized women are seeking help for schizophrenic tendencies like emptiness and midnight knocks syndromes. Schizophrenia is a mental disease marked by disconnection between thoughts, feelings, and actions frequented with delusions and retreat from social life.

Talking of physical health, there has been an increased incidence in the number of new biological diseases, especially diabetes and ulcers. Dr. Rehana Kausar, state surveillance officer, Department of Health, J&K noted a marked increase in the cases of abortion, incest, infidelity, crumbling marriages and early menopause. "All this leads to increased social problems like unwanted pregnancy, unemployment and to be specific, such cases as the recent sex scandal," she added.

As all the delegates agreed upon the sorry state of infrastructure in J & K, the discussions also focused around the fact that there is not only an absence of machinery and paraphernalia necessary to deliver basic health facilities, but also a huge dearth of manpower. There is a total imbalance between need and supply.

"In the whole state of J & K, there are 13 psychiatrists, 2-3 clinical psychiatrists, 100-150 counselors and 400-500 lay counselors," informed Dr Arshad Hussain, Registrar, Government hospital for Psychiatric Diseases, Srinagar. To add to the problem there is no uniformity in the distribution of

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services, as the luxury of visiting a specialist is available only to those in major cities like Srinagar.

Unfortunately, J & K is the only state where the national mental health and the district mental health program have not been implemented in letter and spirit. Additionally, mental health has not been integrated with physical health in J & K unlike other places. An array of NGOs is working in J & K with many of them working in the area of mental health. They are making efforts but there is no coordination, resulting in inequitable distribution of professionals as they are clustered in only a handful of areas.

Women, the largest survivor group in Jammu and Kashmir, have shown immense resilience. But continuing violence is taking a toll on them. Women who are biologically predisposed to depression and anxiety are now displaying schizophrenic tendencies.

Drawing out a pyramidal representation of implementing various health programs in J & K, the professionals in the field said at the grass root level, they should have lay counselors. At the next level, which is at that of the dispensaries and Public Health Centers, multipurpose health workers can be trained to deal with basic mental illness, such as identifying the patients, counseling them and if need be, referring them to specialists. At the level of the sub-district hospital, which caters to a population of over one lakh, counselors should be present. These counselors can go a long way in not only treating the masses but also creating a mass awareness to root out stigmas attached to psychological disorders. At the district hospitals, psychiatrists should be appointed who can provide counseling and aid the process of rehabilitation.

Also, at the community level, teachers, religious leaders, sarpanchs and volunteers can be trained and sensitized about various health-related issues so that they can provide first aid

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service to the needy. At the state level, referral units such as NIMHANS need to shoulder responsibility. There is also a need to create more awareness among the people for visiting hospitals for pschyhiatric problems adding no stigma should be attached to being seen with mental health professionals any more.

3.2 Education

Forgotten casualties of war

Since past few years she has rarely moved out of her house. Within the "secure" walls of her small home in a congested lane in downtown Srinagar, Kulsooma, 25, works non-stop helping her mother in the daily household chores while her 20-year old brother who has also quit his studies to work as a coppersmith and make copper utensils used in traditional Kashmiri kitchens, sits in one corner of the house wistfully. The friends that she once had are no longer there. In fact, the day a tragedy struck her, they maintained no contact with their class mate and moved on with their respective lives.

For young Kulsooma and her mother, that fateful day is hard to forget. Tears don't stop flowing from the eyes of her mother Sharifa Begum. Emotions overpower her and she ends up weeping endlessly and coughing chokingly. After all, no mother can see her daughter who was once known for her beauty, grace and high intellect, sit at home after quitting her studies. But that is what violence did to her only daughter few years ago.

Many years ago on 6 August 2000, Kulsooma, a class 9th student of Nawakadal Higher Secondary situated in the interior of Srinagar city, was going to tuition with her cousin sister from her house in Maharaj Gunj to Shiekh Mohalla when four boys appeared from nowhere and threw a bottle of acid on her face.

These were the times when entire Kashmir was in the grip of fear as Lashkar-e-Jabbar, a lesser known militant group was

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enforcing Muslim dress code besides asking the Kashmiri women and girls to sit at home and quit studies, with the support of Kashmir's only women militant organization Dukharan-e-Millat.

An attempt of Talibanisation of education in Kashmir was, in fact, started in 1991-92 when Allah Tigers and Dukhtaran-e-Millat had issued such warnings to the women regarding the dress code. Lashkar-e-Jabbar cadres had already thrown acid on two Muslim women government teachers Gazala and Rubia for not wearing veil and wearing make-up on their faces at Rangers Stop near Khanyar in downtown Srinagar. In some villages in Kashmir, the Hizbul Mujahideen cadres had also put up posters asking the parents not to send their children to schools.

Though the Kashmiri society had been facing such threats since the inception of militancy when the gun totting militants forcibly closed cinema halls and liquor shops in the Valley in January 1990, Dukhtaran-e-Millat chief Asiya Andrabi had also been asking Kashmiri women to quit all government jobs and sit at home. "Earning a livelihood is the responsibility of man and thus Kashmiri women should resign from their jobs and thus help in the Islamic reforms," Asiya had said.

What was really heartening was the fact that not many parents paid heed to such diktats. But few of them actually withdrew their girls from schools and colleges.

In this background, acid-attack on Kulsooma came as a shock to Kashmiri society. As the boys threw acid on her face that fateful day, she put her hands on the face trying to cover it. Wearing her cousin's Shalwar-Kameez and her father's nine-number shoes as she did not have anything to wear, she recalls the world going blind before her eyes. She couldn't see anything after the attack. Her cries rented the air. She requested people to come to her rescue, help her in shifting to the hospital but

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all in vain. For the fear of the terrorists, nobody came forward to help her.

Fauzia, her cousin who was with her at the time of the attack, somehow managed little bit of water and threw it on her face to lessen her pain. But it didn't help her too. She then somehow managed to shift her to hospital in an auto-rickshaw; her parents were informed meanwhile and young Kulsooma was hospitalized in Srinagar hospital with severe face burns.

Ten years after the tragedy, Kulsooma is still terrorized. She rarely speaks. Probe her further and she answers only in monosyllables. Her mother Sharifa Begum does the entire the entire talking.

"Since she was acid-attacked, she has stopped talking. She speaks very less and keeps confined to her own self," informs Sharifa adding that her daughter is still to recover from the shock that she has been forced to discontinue her studies and she would never be able to become a doctor, an ambition she nurtured for all these years. Handicapped for her entire life, Kulsooma perhaps could have re-started her life as any other normal person had the medical treatment come to her handy.

Behind those black goggles, one of those beautiful eyes has been replaced by a glass eye. And that beautiful face is badly scarred despite the fact that a number of surgeries were conducted on it.

"After we took to her SHM Hospital, the doctors did not take it seriously. Even we did not take it seriously thinking it would be fine in a couple of days. We did not assess the impact of the acid attack," confesses her mother adding that this resulted in her permanent handicap. She lost her eye.

Surprisingly, no government representative or any state minister came to them after the attack. Only the police came that too to complete the formalities. An FIR was registered with

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the Maharaj Gunj police station and till date, nobody has been arrested for crippling the young girl and ending her academic career.

Since past few years, the entire family went from door to door seeking financial support for the medical treatment of their daughter. For the poor parents, it was even very difficult to spend Rs. 30 everyday on the fee charged by the Sher-e-Kashmir Institute for Medical Sciences. The family which was already finding it too difficult to survive, did not get anything from the state government as the Rs one lakh help under SRO-43 rules of the J&K government could be given only to those families whose kins had died in militancy-related incidents. No help could be given to those who were its survivors leading much difficult lives.

"I took Kulsooma to AIIMS to get her eyes examined, I took her to Dr Hardia in Indore, even to world famous eye specialist Dr. Daljit Singh in Amritsar," says Sharifa adding that the then state chief minister Dr Farooq Abdullah, on his own, arranged for her treatment in Apollo Hospital in Delhi for 2-3 years. The senior Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq gave them Rs 20,000 but told the media that he had given the family Rs one lakh for the treatment of the girl. Both mother and daughter are indebted to the Times of India Kashmir correspondent Salim Pandit who managed to give them Rs one lakh through some charitable organization. Separatist leader Hasim Qureshi also donated some money and they used it to get her eye and plastic surgery done. And after years of treatment, ultimately eye surgeon Dr Manzoor of Srinagar got her damaged eye replaced by a glass eye.

But what was more tragic for the entire family was the harsh fact that her father who could not bear this shock died exactly a year after the attack on her.

With the attack on Kulsooma, panic and tension had gripped

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the college-school going females. The attendance at girls' schools had dropped 40 per cent since the attacks. The police had to beef up security outside girls' colleges and school in Kashmir.

Sharifa Begum's only worry these days is who would marry her girl who wanted to carve an identity of her own in the Kashmiri society through her education. The J&K State Human Rights Commission had sanctioned Rs 1.50 lakh in her favor but it has not reached the poor girl as yet. Her beloved father's death coupled with her own handicap has resulted in Kulsooma's dreams dying young in the violent valley.

While Kulsooma's dreams died young in the valley of death and she can no longer think of a normal life she envisaged for herself years ago, the dreams of making it big in her career and education were also snatched forever from the eyes of Tabinda Gani Lone, a young teenage girl who was raped and murdered on 20 July 2007 at Langate in frontier district of Kupwara.

Tabinda, 14, another bright student of class 8th, had left her school for tuition and had told her parents that she would return before lunch. While heading home from school, she met her brother, a government teacher who was going to offer Friday prayers on Batpora-Langate track in Langate. When her brother returned, he did not find Tabinda and enquired about her. After the family failed to trace her, they filed a missing report in Police Station Handwara. A police party headed by DSP discovered her school bag and shoes near the orchards. Later, her body was also found from an orchard in Langate the same day. The innocent and brilliant Tabinda Gani was gang-raped and subsequently killed, when she was on her way back from school. Every aspect of human honour and dignity was violated.

"We came to know that four persons had laid an ambush and abducted her and took her to the orchards. They raped and then murdered her. There were marks and stains on her body which revealed the nature and brutality of the crime and the

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tough resistance that she gave to her rapists," family members added.

The gruesome incident sent shockwaves across the Valley and triggered spontaneous protests in the summer of 2007. Following the public outcry, police arrested four accused including two non-locals who confessed their crime.

Though the government offered the family an ex-gratia relief of Rs one lakh, her parents rejected the relief offer and demanded stern punishment to her killers. Tabinda's elder brother Dr M. Ashraf Shah who is in Saudi Arabia said that they would settle for nothing less than the death sentence for the culprits. Shah said, "We have full faith in the Indian judiciary but political patronage to the main accused may hamper justice in Tabinda's rape and murder case."

Four years have elapsed since the day this gruesome incident shocked the Valley but the family members of Tabinda Gani are still awaiting justice as the case is going on at "snail's pace." Allegedly, the main offender Azhar Billa Mir is a nephew of ex-MLA Gani Mir and this could be one of the reasons of silence of judiciary.

The J&K government has instituted a State Award of Bravery for Children in the name of Tabinda Gani for demonstrating exemplary bravery and putting up formidable resistance before falling prey to the evil designs of the gangsters.

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No school for Dardpora girls

Imagine a village in North Kashmir which has a population of over two thousand but not a single school exists for the girl students. Surprisingly, in a conservative society where religion does allow the girls to study but in separate educational institutions, the policy makers never thought of catering to the educational needs of the girl students. In this part of the war-

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ravaged Kashmir, it simply seems that the girl students do not exist at all.

Welcome to Dardpora, situated some 20 kilometers from Kupwara town on Keran road in Kralpora block. Devoid of water and electricity, the Dardpora village is divided into two parts- Upper Dardpora and Lower Dardpora. The Lower Dardpora is dominated by Kashmiri speaking Muslims while the Upper one has Pahari or Gujjars (nomads) who speak various dialects spoken all along this border belt on the LoC.

Difficult terrain and the dry (Kandi) belt makes this region highly inaccessible. Being close to the line of control and situated on the infiltration and transit route of the militants, the village faced much destruction in the few initial years which also saw tremendous loss of human lives and thus and an overwhelming number of orphans. The rough estimates suggest that over 400 orphans live in the village.

As I set out for Dardpora with two social activists from a charitable organization MNWA and a young but unemployed Kupwara post-graduate youth Zain-ul-Abideen who has a degree in forensic sciences, the bumpy ride on the un-metalled road in the hilly terrain was enough to give a severe back ache. And as the vehicle halted to a screech by the side of a school building which was in shambles, hundreds of small kids surrounded us. Perhaps, it was an uncommon sight to see outsiders thronging the poor villagers who have suffered badly due to militancy.

As we got down the vehicle, Zain guided me to the school, asking to tread carefully as the only way to reach the school is through a stream. Though not in full spate, we crossed the stream by stepping on the boulders and reached the school. As it was the holy month of Ramzan, the teachers were observing fast and thus basking in the sun in the ground of Government Boys Middle School, Dardpora. The entire village has just two

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schools and ironically both of these are boy's schools. As per the existing rules, girls cannot study in boy's schools and vice-versa. However, girls have been admitted in these schools.

Nazir Ahmed, teacher, Government Boys Middle School, Dardpora informed that the school which was started in 1960 as a primary school has now 270 students. Out of these, 106 are girls and 164 are boys. The teachers of the school do admit that girls' education has suffered much in the district. Though poverty is the main reason that the widows mothers do not to send their daughters to the schools, however the villagers do confess that their religion also does not permit them to send their girls to study with the boys in one school.

"Besides, the religious attitudes stop parents from sending their girls to schools which are situated few miles away," said Fatima Begum, a widow adding that had there been girls' primary, middle or high schools, they would have considered sending their daughters for education.

The area needs a separate girls' school which would also see more girls coming to the school. Mothers are hesitant in sending their daughters to co-educational schools. For high school, students (both boys and girls) have to go to Panzgam which is quite far from Kralpora.

Villagers believe that Dardpora has deliberately been ignored in all these years. As most of the villagers took up arms in Dardpora when 'Jihad' started in Kashmir donning the role of a "Mujahid" (freedom fighter) fighting for "the freedom of Kashmir from India", and most of them later got killed, the government deliberately did not want to do anything for Dardpora village which acquired the sobriquet "Village of widows", alleged the villagers.

Zain-ul-Abideen, the well educated Kupwara youth supplemented: "Yes, not only Dardpora, but I believe that the entire Kupwara district has been ignored by the people at the

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helm of the affairs. For they believe that it is heavily militancy-infested area. Besides, the impression also goes that Kupwara residents always side with militants. Everyday so many central and state schemes are being announced for rural areas but practically nothing reaches them, he said adding this has resulted in lots of frustration among the Kupwara youth.

The education of orphans of Dardpora, like rest of the valley, according to Professor Abdul Gani Madhosh, former Head of Department, Education, University of Kashmir, was the first causality after their parents were killed. The interrupted schooling and family pressure compelled numerous orphans to look for jobs in the early age so as to shoulder the responsibility of their family. In many cases they undertook employment, which were hazardous to their health and also were forced to work for long hours. The orphans also suffered on multiple problems including complete absence of basic facilities like drinking water, toilet, first aid and low and irregular wages.

Clearly, whatever Professor Madhosh said was visible in Dardpora too. Move to Upper Dardpora which is dominated by tribal people including Gujjars and Paharis, even a glass of water was hard to fine. As there is acute scarcity of water in this area, the residents are mainly dependent on rainwater. When one has to struggle hard to survive, who would think about education?

Move a couple of miles upwards towards Upper Dardpora on the same dusty bumpy road and one reaches Government Middle School Satboin, Dardpora which is dominated by orphans. Two schools are running in one dilapidated building. One is a regular school while the other one is Mobile school meant for Gujjars and Pahari nomadic tribal community. Mobile school has 30 students while the regular one has over 200 students.

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Rubeena Bano (10) who studies in the school is the youngest of six sisters and one brother. Her eldest sister Resham Jahan is married in Zirhama, brother Parvez Ahmed is in class 11th, father Sasifuddin Khawaja and mother Sarwat Jahan died over a decade ago. Parveen Bano is in class 7th. Her father Mohad Sadiq Khawaja was also killed leaving behind five children inclding three daughters. Her two sisters are uneducated and married.

Listen to the stories of these orphaned children and one is left with nothing but pain and grief. These are the children whose parents were killed during the ongoing turmoil and they have now become victims of circumstances. Life is tougher for the girls comparatively. In a land where gun is the law and molestation and rapes are common, a widow is more worried about seeing her orphan daughters married of safely, than getting her educated, says Professor Bashir Dabla of Kashmir University.

The number of orphans in Kashmir is increasing day by day. A survey conducted by an NGO 'J&K Yateem Trust", Srinagar a couple of years ago found that the maximum number of orphans was in district Kupwara and it was over 15,000 children at that time. The number would have certainly gone up by this time.

Abdul Rashid Bhat, a Pahari teacher in GMS Satboin informed that people had very less inclination towards girl education earlier but now they are more inclined and aware about it. However, boys still get most of the education. Besides, people are quite religious in the area and as there is no scope for co-education in Islam, they oppose girls studying in boys schools. No wonder girls' education has suffered much here.

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An arduous journey

Years ago, when armed insurgency erupted in Kashmir, Yasmeen Jaan had just turned four that spring. As the violence engulfed each and every part of Kashmir Valley, her village Hakoora in Anantnag district of South Kashmir also couldn't remain untouched from the mindless bloodshed. What normalcy and leading peaceful lives in once a paradise on the earth was like, remained unknown to Yasmeen, it still is. Routine deaths, encounters, cross firing, grenade blasts, identification parades, searches and cordon operations created a fear psychosis leaving some indelible impressions on her four-year old mind like hundreds and thousands of other such children of conflict.

All Yasmeen remembers is that she had to undergo a lot of pain, trauma and suffering for reaching her Masters level (she is pursuing her MA in Political Science from the University of Kashmir). Her education was affected very badly as in rural Kashmir, 'blackouts' were quite common in those days. Even if she wanted to study, the security forces would ask the people to switch off the lights in their houses by 9 pm. After that, not even a streak of light should come from any house.

"For years we saw blackouts. My parents would sometimes put 2-3 layers of curtains on the widows so that the light would not go out in the night and we could study," recalls Yasmeen adding night is the time when everything is calm and quiet and concentration is maximum at that time only. And in winters when the suns would set very early, these blackouts would make their lives very difficult. For those houses situated closer to the army camps, life was tougher as people were forced to switch off the lights early. After that it was nothing but deafening and frightening silence.

Ask her if peace has returned to her life as Kashmir has become normal and Yasmeen bursts out: "Peace does not mean if the

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shops are open, traffic is plying and there is lot of hustle and bustle. Peace to me means if my mother would stop worrying about my return to home safely at the end of the day. Peace would prevail if there won't be bullets flying all around me unexpectedly at any time and there won't be any hartals, bandhs and killings. I don't term this deceptive normalcy as peace. Peace is still far away from our lives"

Yasmeen is among hundreds of younger generation of Kashmiri girls who have learnt to live with death. What normalcy is, they have never experienced. The situation prevailing in strife-torn Kashmir valley never allowed them to do so. When abnormal became normal in Valley, these girls could not dare to dream in the conflict situations. Survival was the basic question in the lives of these girls who had to face crackdowns, curfews, bombings, suicidal attacks and most of all, the harassment from both militants and security forces.

For hundreds of girls like Yasmeen who hailed from rural Kashmir, reaching Kashmir University was a dream which they could never nurse. The conflict situations never allowed them to do so. Their lives were and still are, stripped of dreams. And if they would have dared to dream in the conflict environs, many of these girls from rural Kashmir who have made it to Kashmir University would have pursued those dreams in the direction they wanted to and not in the way things turned out to be.

But perhaps that is what Kashmir has become. The words like "dream" never existed in the lives of these girls. Though most of the girls from rural Kashmir who grew up in volatile situation could never make it to even colleges in their respective districts, there are yet very few girls who have able to purse higher education. But for them too, the journey from their villages in far off areas of Kashmir to the posh Kashmir University in the heart of Srinagar city has been full of potholes.

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Talk to these Kashmiri girls from the far off villages of Anantnag, Kupwara, Baramulla, Budgam and one gets to know about their pain, trauma and sufferings in the course of their academic pursuits. Though they do consider themselves lucky as their parents did allow them to go to Srinagar to purse higher education, they still miss and remember their friends who discontinued their studies very early.

Kehkashan Mumtaz, a PhD scholar from Bandipore, Baramulla doing his research in English on a very famous Kashmir poet Aga Shahid Ali has been a witness to death and destruction in Kashmir. But as she puts it: "After all these years of turmoil and sufferings, I have learnt to live with the situation. I have learnt to live with death. I have learnt to live with bullets flying all around," says Kehkashan adding their psyche has been affected terribly by the turmoil. What has turned out to be most disastrous is the fact that they have become least ambitious and do not dream about anything.

"We are a terrorized lot – terrorized by the constant possibility of search, beating, torture or getting shot in indiscriminate return fire," avers Kehkashan adding hundreds of father, brothers, uncles, sons have gone missing in the past 20 years and many are still being summoned by the security forces. "How can we live with peace when our entire families shiver to death in such situations," questions an emotionally charged Kehkashan. Undoubtedly, one of the main ingredients of 'permanent peace' would be the absence of terror from their lives forever.

But then what peace means to girls like Yasmeen and her generation of Kashmiris?

"When no frequent curfews, hartals and crackdowns would take place in Kashmir, no atrocities and rapes would be committed, when parents would not wait anxiously worrying about their kids safety, when there is no psychological pressure

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on our minds, when no girl would be forced to withdraw from the school, college or university," spells out Yasmeen.

Peace to her, says Kehkashan, primarily, would mean a life without fear, the absence of any security forces on the streets on Kashmir.

For Suraiyya Salim who is pursuing her LLM from Kashmir University and comes from village Kaichachkot, Pulwana, South Kashmir, recalling those days is like going through that trauma once again.

A brilliant student, she was in 6th or 7th class when the turmoil started. Luckily, her parents never differentiated between her and her brother and gave equal treatment to both. They wanted to send her to a good school but as violence had erupted, they put her to a nearby school only for the sake of her safety. After completing her matriculation from Islamia Model High School Bijbehara, few kilometers from her village and 12th from Govt. Girls Higher Secondary School Anantnag, she graduated from Government Girls Degree College Anantnag in 2001.

That was the era when strikes had become very frequent; curfews and hartals had become order of the day, schools used to shut down for days, teachers used to remain absent and even students who thought that *'Azadi'* was round the corner, would never attend the schools regularly. What a mess had become of education in Valley.

Many of Suraiyya's class fellows could not continue their education as their parents withdrew them from schools due to conflict situation but she was perhaps lucky that her advocate father thought that it was very important to impart education to a girl despite his concern for his daughter's security, and so did her housewife mother who always wanted her to stand on her own in life.

"Today, when I meet my friends who could not study, they do

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tell me how lucky I was to go to college and University to get education. But even for me, the journey was not smooth," says Suraiyya. All of them faced terrible times as the frequent curfews, hartals and crackdowns would force them to remain inside. Even the schools and colleges used to remain shut down. And on any "normal" day when they would go to schools and colleges, their parents would wait for them anxiously worrying about their safety.

The turmoil did not affect the education of girls alone; it left indelible psychological impressions also on their minds. The girls recall that at the very outset of the turmoil, any sound of explosion would make their families flee their homes and come out in the open. Not only the girls but their parents' psyche was also affected.

Though the worry is not less even now when their daughters have traveled miles away from the safe surroundings of their secure homes to get education in Kashmir University, still their parents have one satisfaction- most of them have been given mobile phones by their parents (the cell phones were introduced just few years ago in Kashmir). The reason is clear. They want to remain in touch with them constantly.

The students speak about repression by security forces, revealing a state of mind that is terrorized by the constant possibility of search, beating, torture or getting shot in indiscriminate return fire. They also speak about the trauma they faced when there was killing of their near and near ones.

Pursuing her PhD in Zoology from Kashmir University, Shabnam Khalid hails from Arampora, Sopore, North Kashmir. A student can think of good education in a normal environment but the students of a strife-torn state could never even think of it, she said adding they were in great trauma and even going to college seemed to be luxury.

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"There is no question of not getting affected by the turmoil. Turmoil affected our brothers as much as it affected us. They could not go to the playfields; their personality could not be groomed. They did not witness a normal childhood," she adds.

For most of these girls, their lives are all about reconciliation. Their lives have greatly been disturbed by the conflict as it has disturbed their way of life. Fear and tension always weighs heavily on their minds. Most of them wanted to pursue some goals, they wanted to aim very high and carve a niche for themselves in their lives. But they could not. Kehkashan wanted to become a journalist but the situation forced her to simply pursue her research in English. Arifa Sufi who graduated in Mass communication also wanted to do her masters in it but she couldn't for the situation prevailing in Kashmir did not allow her to do so.

"Being in media in Kashmir, in strife-torn situation is very tough for a girl. Pursuing a career in terrorism-infested Kashmir is almost impossible for a girl," she opines.

As Kehkashan puts it - "Most of us quit being ambitious, something died deep within us. One receives education to get some sense of self respect but we have seen the times when our near and dear ones were humiliated."

While in rest of the India, most of the students passing out from higher secondary schools and colleges would go after their dreams and purse the same, the Kashmiri girls did not dare do that. The question was not whether to pursue a career in medical or non-medial, journalism or engineering but the question was whether they would be able to reach home safely in the evening.

Perhaps this is the reason that most of the affluent families of Kashmir, be it rural or urban, have sent their children outside Jammu and Kashmir to pursue educations. Today hundreds of Kashmiri students are pursuing their education - school, college and university - outside J&K.

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These girls of the conflict yearn for peace, a solution to Kashmir issue so that their dignity is restored to them. None of them or their relatives are disgraced, all of them are provided a space of their own and the territory of their thoughts is not intruded by the deafening sounds of the big explosions.

3.3 Prostitution

Flesh trade - an offshoot of militancy in Kashmir

The sight of a handful of veiled women raiding a number of hotels, restaurants and cyber-cafes in Srinagar few years ago was a rare one. Never before had anyone seen a women's group campaigning against prostitution in Kashmir. A thing one could simply not associate with Kashmir.

"Mariyam squad" of the banned women's separatist organization "Dukhtaran-e-Millat" (Daughters of Faith), would be seen in the Civil Lines area, including Lal Chowk, Court Road, Regal Chowk, Lambert Lane, Maulana Azad Road and Residency Road. 'Daughters of Faith' in burqas "advised" people, including women, present at the hotels and cafes to avoid visiting these places and also asked the owners of these hotels, restaurants and cyber cafes not to allow any couple to sit in the privacy of cabins.

This aggressive campaign launched by the "Mariyam squad" against sex workers whose numbers, it claimed, had grown alarmingly in the state, shook the sociologists as this was not only rare in the Valley that had come to be associated with death and destruction but also because most Kashmiris were under the impression that their society was relatively free of social evils and more or less conservative in nature.

But it wasn't.

Since the beginning, the things like flesh trade, prostitution or trafficking of women were unknown and taboo to Kashmiri

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society for nobody had heard or perhaps indulged in such kind of things. However, Kashmir no longer remained untouched by it.

The flesh trade in Kashmir needs to be analyzed holistically and not as an independent issue.

Kashmir has a number of widows who lost their husbands to the violence in all these years. Rough estimates suggest that over 25,000 women have become widows in Kashmir and there are 40,000 orphans children in valley. Over all these years, the women who got widowed and were not educated, suffered on various accounts.

" When you have no support system, when you are not educated, when you do not have any job, you have nobody to sustain you and your kids, then one option is begging and the other one is prostitution," says Tabassum Ishtiyaq who works for J&K Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), a valley-based human rights non-governmental organization.

Similar is the case with the half widows who are yet to reconcile to the deaths of their husbands. Their husbands have gone missing or have simply disappeared. They run from pillar to post to get some information about their whereabouts, trudge to police stations and courts trying to trace their sons, husbands and brothers. In the process, some are exploited also. Few of them want money to keep their kitchens going.

"Illiteracy, unemployment and conflict situation has created such problems like flesh trade in Kashmir," says Ishtiyaq adding that the state has also done a little to better the situation of such women who really need help and are victims of the turmoil.

Isolation, poverty and social insensitivities have left many women affected by militancy without any support. As they do not have any jobs, they find it difficult to make both ends meet

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and to bring up their orphaned children. "Finding no help from anywhere is compelling many women to enter the flesh trade, the social and moral cost of which has not been accounted by social scientists and reformers," says Dr.Khurshid-ul-Islam, a Kashmiri sociologist.

There are no legal red light areas in Srinagar or any other part of Kashmir but prostitution has been going on nonetheless. Professor Dabla argues that besides all these reasons, the forced imposition of Islamic dress codes by the militant groups in Kashmir is also one of the factors for the flesh trade in Kashmir.

"Few years ago only when Lashkar-e-Jabbar and Dukhtaran-e-Millat tried to enforce Islamic dress code on Kashmir women, I told my students and fellow colleagues that it would result in a very strong dangerous reaction from Kashmiri women. And that is what is happening," says the Professor adding any social change which is imposed on somebody, had serious implications. The sociologists say that one of the main reasons for flesh trade in Kashmir is the forced imposition of religious codes. In a way, it is a kind of protest, a revolt against some kind of action and one of them is definitely moral degradation of Kashmiri society.

Dabla feels that as the widows and half-widows are living in abject poverty in various parts of Kashmir and have no source of income, they are forced to enter prostitution to sustain their families. Besides, he argues that security forces also entrap them. "The army, para-military forces and state police also trap these sufferers of militancy and use them for their benefits. In many cases, girls have been used to seek promotion by the security forces personnel," he adds.

The orphans also indulge in immoral activities. Dabla says the orphans were indulging in prostitution and drug addiction, some consuming expectorant having high alcohol percentage. Most of the adolescent boys as well as girls are found engaged

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in drug abuse, starting with consumption of Corex to the use of Charas and Bhang. A small percentage of adolescent girls are also involved in sex work directly or indirectly.

The present day Kashmiri is witnessing moral degradation. And the problem at present is multi-faceted and needs to be countered on many fronts, feels Dabla adding that flesh trade is a problem to be fought on many fronts. It could be controlled only if better employment opportunities are given to the people of Kashmir. The government has to provide job opportunities to unemployed educated youths besides such persons who have become victims of militancy in the state, he adds.

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'Sexploitation' racket that shook Kashmir

For years, Sabeena, the woman at the heart of sex scandal that shook Kashmir in the summer of 2006, ran the racket successfully luring gullible girls with a promise of "better life". She operated openly but nobody challenged her as she would often flaunt her strong patronage of police, politicians, bureaucrats and powerful businessmen, a nexus, which in the name of restoring peace in Kashmir can get away with anything. So arrogant she was that she once even slapped a police officer who dared to take her on. But finally she ran out of luck when one porn CD featuring nude girls and amateur porn films - the new venture she and her husband Abdul Hamid Bulla, a medical assistant, had diversified into - began circulating in Srinagar. People who saw the film and recognized one of the girls as a resident of their locality, informed the police station Shaheed Gunj. The young girl was questioned and what emerged was a sinister web of sex and sleaze in which under-age girls were sexually exploited and abused. As many as 43 girls, most of them minors, were used and the clients included some of the biggest names in Kashmir's political, bureaucratic and defense circles. The girls came from poor families and were

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lured into prostitution by promises of government jobs. After being coerced into having sex with powerful clients, the girls were then blackmailed through pictures and videos. The magnitude of the racket and the fact that it operated in the heart of Srinagar shook Kashmir's conservative society.

Sabeena's powerful clientele included two former ministers of the ruling Congress-PDP coalition, a senior IAS officer, a DIG of BSF, a former Additional Advocate General of the State, a Congress municipal councilor, 13 police officers including three superintendents and seven sub divisional police officers, 10 businessmen besides several other government officials.

When the 'sexploitation' racket was reported by the media, Kashmir was shaken to the core. Protests broke out all over Srinagar city and a desperate government envisaging a law and order situation, arrested Sabeena. But it failed to quell the tempers and Srinagar came to a boil. An angry mob tore down Sabeena's house at Habba Kadal in full media glare. Men armed with axes, batons and crowbars stormed her house. All of her household articles were thrown down and subjected to bonfire on the bank of river Jhelum. Parts of the structure, including all doors, windows and ventilators, were forcefully demolished. What was also discovered from Sabeena's house were "contraceptives", powerful "sedatives", dozens of CDs and diaries with names and phone numbers of police officers, government officials and some businessmen. As protests spilled over to other parts of Kashmir, chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad appealed for calm and ordered a CBI probe into the case.

But the present sex-scandal had its roots in another sex scandal surfaced couple of years ago. This sex scandal had first come to fore when police's intelligence wing launched a covert operation to investigate reports about a massive sex abuse network being run in different parts of the city in August 2004. The investigations then also had led to Sabeena who originally hails

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from Trikanjan, Uri and was married to Bhulla of Reshi Mohalla, Habba Kadal. The police learnt that Sabeena had been running a prostitution ring with an exclusive clientele of powerful politicians, security force and police officers. She lured the girls with the promise of job. Her husband began portraying himself as a doctor and floated a non-existent company "Worldwide Dream Builders Associates". The company slogan was "We change lives". Bulla also conferred on himself a title of a doctor. Some of the incentives his company offered, as his visiting card suggested, include "financial/time freedom, permanent income and tension free life and world tour." Bulla used the company as a front to hunt for credulous girls and then coerce them into flesh trade supervised by his wife.

Majority of the girls, whose names surfaced during the probe, had been lured by promises of government jobs as well as force. Sabeena was confident that the law enforcement machinery would not take action in case she is caught and the girls would also not speak for fear of personal disgrace, humiliation and social repercussions. That year in 2004 only, an FIR numbering 17/ 2004 dated 14-10-2004 under section 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 of PITA (Prevention of Immoral Trafficking Act) was registered against Sabeena at Maharaj Gunj police station. Sabeena, Bulla, two businessmen Ashwani Singh of Gandhinagar Jammu, Jagbeer Singh of Canal, Jammu, a Kashmiri trader Ghulam Qadir Bhat of Shamaswari besides four girls Afrooza of Aloochi Bagh, Raheela of Tulsi Bagh, Haseena of Shopian and Shameema alias Soni of Batamaloo were arrested by the police. But thereafter, the police handled the case in such a manner in October 2004 case that all accused walked free within a month. Once freed, Sabeena went about her business with vengeance, riding high on her strong patronage. Ironically, one of the accused filed a defamation suit against police and a plea to quash the FIR.

Emboldened by her clout, she looked for areas where recruiting poor girls could be easy without notice. The congested areas

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on river Jhelum in downtown Srinagar seemed an ideal location. She first inhabited at Chinkral Mohalla. When the residents came to know of her activities, she was forced to leave the area. She then settled in Habba Kadal, in the house which was damaged by the mob.

Allegedly, it was PDP patron and the then chief minister Mufti Muhammad Sayyed who in 2004, as reported, had hushed up scandal when it was first unearthed by the then intelligence chief of police. Fearing collapse of his government, due to involvement of some ministers, the Mufti government had buried the scandal without a trace.

But few months later, when two porn CDs and a group of elders from Samaj Sudhar Committee of Habba Kadal visited the Shaheedgunj police station to file a complaint on March, 14, 2006, the "official patrons" of Sabeena had no idea that this case will open a Pandora's Box and expose what they had carefully hushed up in October 2004. In fact, the case would not have been registered if it had come to the notice of Sabeena's "patrons" in the government. When the SDPO, Shaheedgunj, started investigation and identified the victim as a 15-year-old school dropout from Drebyar locality of Habbakadal, the minor girl was called along with her parents for questioning which not only led to the exposure of Sabeena's prostitution ring, her coercive ways with the help of a gang of counterinsurgents but also a well-knit politician-police-security force beneficiary network.

Unmindful of the ramifications of the investigation, the SDPO prepared a detailed confidential report to inform his seniors that shook Sabeena's "patrons" in police. But with a massive public outcry and constant media focus, official patronage couldn't stop the case which became a rallying point for all. Sabeena was arrested to cool the public anger. The separatist found a new issue to attack the government and security

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establishment. Syed Ali Shah Geelani called the incident a war crime. "We demand a probe by UN tribunal for such crimes. The sex scam is the part of the chain of war crimes by Indian forces in Kashmir," he said. The clergymen condemned the government agencies in Friday prayer sermons at mosques for "indulging in flesh trade and holding sham investigations". Mirwaiz Umar and almost all others charged the Government and the State Police with "promoting the social crime and flesh trade" and "shielding the culprits".

The sex scandal also led Omar Abdullah, the present chief minister to quit in July 2009 as the opposition linked him to the massive racket. J&K's main opposition party the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) alleged that Abdullah figured in the list of 102 persons accused by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). He resigned over the issue but his resignation was not accepted by the Governor. The CBI later made a statement that his name never surfaced in that list.

Five years later, as the case is still being investigated by Central Bureau of Investigation in a session's court in Punjab and the accused are out on bail; few more sex scandals have surfaced in other parts of the state. While the Jammu Kashmir police recently arrested thirteen people including four women in a sex racket case in a well known hotel in Srinagar in July 2011, in Poonch, sex racket was also unearthed in border belt of Gulpur around same time.

Besides, two of the alleged victims of the infamous Kashmir sex scandal 2006 have turned hostile and gave clean chit to five accused rendering a jolt to the prosecution. Few months back in January 2011, a 25-year-old woman turned hostile after earlier alleging rape charges against former Jammu and Kashmir Minister Raman Mattoo, former DSP Mohammad Ashraf Mir, bureaucrat Iqbal Khandey, former DSP Mohammad Yusuf Mir and former Additional Advocate General Anil Sethi. Previously, a 45-year-old J&K woman police constable too had turned

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hostile and gave clean chit to Mattoo. She had previously alleged that she was sexually assaulted in 2004 by Mattoo for providing her the job. The scandal would soon be out of public memory, thanks to its influential patrons.

3.4 Purdah

Dress and be damned !

- 22 March 1999.....Two young innocent Kashmiri girls, Mehvish, 16, and Nowsheen, 14 years, are shot in their legs for wearing jeans by the Pakistan–sponsored terrorists. The incident creates national headlines.
- 03 August, 2001..... Terrorists enter the house of Habib Dar of village Bulbul, Nowgam and call his daughter Humera out and accuse her of not adhering to the Islamic Dress Code. She is then shot and is critically injured. Though, the young girl recuperated in the Bone and Joint Hospital at Barzulla, Srinagar but she remained in the state of shock and trauma for quite some time.
- 07 August, 2001.....Militants belonging to lesser known Lashkar-e-Jabbar outfit throw acid on the faces of Gazala and Rubia, two teachers at Nagbal Government High School, Srinagar, while they are returning from the school picnic accusing them of not wearing clothes as prescribed by the Islamic Dress Code issued by their outfit. The incident left two young, energetic, beautiful teachers shocked, traumatized and scarred for life.
- 08 August, 2001.....Terrorists of Lashkar-e-Toiba enter Government Girls Higher Secondary School at Kothibagh situated in the high security zone in the heart of Srinagar city and direct the girls to adhere to the dress code.....

The list may go on.....

When the Kashmiri firebrand leader Ms Mehbooba Mufti,

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president of Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Freedom Party (JKPDP) and daughter of former Union Home minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed criticized the dress edict issued by the lesser known militant outfit Lashkar-e-Jabbar ordering women to wear a full bodied veil (Burqa) and men to keep beard without moustache (Islamic style) and wear 'salwar kameez', she was very right in her observation that this threat given by the unknown militant outfit cannot be taken seriously and women will have to defy this threat.

"Today purdah, tomorrow banning the girls' entry to schools, then closing down of schools.... They can order one thing after the other. How can we agree to listen to these edicts," she asked.

Though the LeJ deadline for the enforcement of the dress code expired and its cadres attacked two unveiled women in Kashmir by throwing coloured water on them, fear and panic gripped women in Kashmir. Initially, the dress code was issued for Kashmiri Muslim women but now the renewed threat has been directed towards the non-Muslim women also who have been asked to wear *Bindis* on their foreheads and wear saffron coloured dupattas. But everybody in Kashmir is pondering over one question only. Would Kashmir go Taliban way? Would history repeat itself? Today, Afghanistan is a faceless country - a country without images, a country where a girl cannot go to schools after 8 years and a woman cannot travel without a male companion. But Kashmir is not Afghanistan and Kashmiri women are not Afghani women but the spirited ones who had bravely fought the tribal raiders in 1947 besides facing many wars with the neighbouring country. Examples are galore where they are competing with men in every sphere of life, be it police, medicine, journalism or administration.

Though there is fear and panic among the masses in Kashmir valley following these edicts on dress code, there is also a growing resentment among the Kashmiri women against forcible implementation of dress code.The LeJ's latest diktat to

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the non-Kashmiri Muslim women to wear *Bindis* and saffron coloured dupattas has also come under sharp criticism.

Lashkar-e-Jabbar which wants the Kashmiri women to "adhere to the complete Islamic dress code" had added a new dimension to the ongoing militancy when its cadres threw acid on two Muslim women government teachers Gazala and Rubia for not wearing veil and wearing make-up on their faces at Rangers Stop near Khanyar in downtown.

Interestingly, Kashmiri women have been an empowered lot despite the prolonged militancy in the state. Kashmiri women have always found a place for themselves in the society. A state of paradoxes as Kashmir has become today, an awareness about the changing global order clearly visible in the in the city.

A stroll along the Polo View and Residency Road towards the famous Lal Chowk and one sees hundreds cyber cafes and computer centres opened up and a number of girls thronging the place. In the cyber era, the talk of donning a burqa seems rubbish to them. But at the same time the scare of the lesser known militant group is also there. Latest fashion garments, trendy dresses and the cosmetics – imported things have found a way in the lives of Kashmir women. Schools have mushroomed in the entire length and breadth of valley thus giving afresh leash of life to the education. With education has come the empowerment for the Kashmiri women.

Though the Kashmiri society has been facing such threats since the inception of militancy only when the gun totting militants forcibly closed cinema halls and liquor shops in the Valley in early 1990 followed by a similar edict on dress code by the women's militant outfit Dukhtaran-e-Millat, its chief Asiya Andrabi has now again asked Kashmiri women to observe purdah, quit all government jobs and sit at home. "Earning a livelihood is the responsibility of man and thus Kashmiri women should resign from their jobs and thus help in the Islamic reforms," Asiya has said. Her outfit which had carried a campaign for the burqa in the early 90s by throwing coloured

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water on the faces of many young girls was fizzled out with her arrest in 1992. Asiya has now threatened that if the women did not observe purdah, her outfit would take "appropriate steps" to force the Kashmiri women to wear the burqa.

Interestingly, despite the ban by the militants in Kashmir on beauty parlours, liquor shops and cinema halls, all these things continued throughout the past decade. The entertainment starved people continued watching video and the beauty parlours still function in some areas of Rajbagh and the Burqa campaign of 1990 died its own death.

The latest move by LeJ on dress code for Kashmiri women has come under sharp criticism by various militant, separatist and political groups. The Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashker-e-Toiba, All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Jamiet-e-Islami, J&K People Democratic Party, J&K Democratic Freedom Party and various other organizations have criticized it. Even the Centre has offered all kind of help to the state including more forces to catch the people or militant groups responsible for it. The most vocal of all voices outside the state that have condemned this move of Talibanisation of Kashmir society is that of Shabana Azmi, Rajya Sabha member and social activist. Several other women's groups and NGOs like Muslim Khawateen Markaz, Kashmir Mass Movement, Mother Women Welfare Organization of Kashmir valley have also termed the recent acid attack on women as an attack on humanity.

The minorities who have been living in Kashmir for ages now see a deep rooted conspiracy in the new diktat to its women by the LeJ which has now asked Hindu women to put *Bindis* on the forehead and Sikh women to wear saffron *Dupatta*. Prominent Sikh leaders who feel that the community has been terrorized by the militants since 2001 when 36 Sikh were massacred in Chittsingpora village coinciding with Bill Clinton's visit to India, apprehend that it could be a part of the bigger move to hound them out of the state.

Even the Millat threat asking women to quit their jobs has

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evoked wide spread criticism. Today, among hundreds of thousands of working women in Kashmir valley, a significant number is of those women whose fathers, husbands or other relatives have been killed in militancy. Having provided jobs in place of their relatives, they are the sole bread earners for their families. If forced to leave their jobs, they would have to face many difficulties.

The LeJ threat has forced the police to act. They are leaving nothing to chance and added force has been deployed outside women colleges and other educational institutions where the girls of Kashmir valley study. Interestingly, the tailors and cloth merchants are making a brisk business in valley these days following a sudden increase in demand for the burqas but as they have also increased rates for stitching and cloth for burqas, the prices of burqas and *abhayas* (Head gear) have shot up to Rs 1,700-Rs 2,200. Due to their growing demand in the Valley, the poor rural women are finding it very difficult to spend such a big amount for getting their burqa stitched.

Senior separatist leader Shabir Ahmad Shah who head J&K Democratic Freedom Party is among those various pro-Pakistan separatist and militant outfits that have condemned any such attempt of Talibanisation of Kashmiri society. Shah said that Islam never gave permission for any such cruel act of throwing acid on innocent women. "They (militant groups) would never be able to force their wishes on the people of Kashmir," said Shah adding that "*Zabar*" and "*Zyadati*" are not allowed in Islam and this move would further create differences among the masses.

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Mission 'Black Out'

Exactly a week after the appearance of mysterious posters in few villages of militancy-infested border district of Rajouri in Jammu region asking women to wear veil (burqa), when Pakistan-sponsored terrorists killed three young women in

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village Siote of Thanamandi area of Rajouri district in Jammu division, most of the people of this border district linked these killings to the burqa-threats given by a lesser known militant group Lashkar-e-Jabbar which had come into lime-light in Kashmir when it had ordered Kashmiri women to adhere to Islamic dress code. However, the top police officials refused to relate this incident to the dress-code threats. Even the Inspector General of Police Jammu Zone Mr. Pitamber Lal Gupta believed that this was in no way related to the burqa diktat.

However, with the burqa-threats getting intensified in the troubled border area, the black robe or Veil has again come to haunt women of troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir again. And the killing of these three girls has also sparked off a big rush for Burqas in Rajouri. Panic and tension has gripped the college-going females who have been threatened of dire consequences if they do not wear Burqa. Most of them have bought burqas. Threatened by the terrorists, some of the parents have even forced their girls to drop out of schools and colleges. In the past few days, the sale of burqas or black robes which cover the entire body has gone up in Rajouri. Shopkeepers selling burqa cloth are doing brisk business and even many of them had to replenish their stock from outside. There has also been a brisk increase in the work of tailors who have suddenly become busy getting overwhelming orders to stitches these robes.

Though there is fear and panic among the people in Rajouri following this edict on dress code, there is also a growing resentment among the women against forcible implementation of dress code. Jabbar has also asked teachers to wear *Sherwani* and have threatened to take action against those who did not follow their directions.

Lashkar-e-Jabbar, which appeared on the scene in 2001 in Kashmir asking women to cover their bodies in Kashmir, resurfaced again in Jammu province when it defined a dress

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code for Muslim women in Rajouri district. LeJ was a forgotten name until few days back when it resurfaced in Rajouri. Most of the resident of Rajouri got scared after they read hand-written posters pasted at various educational institutions asked the girls to adopt the desired dress code. Girls feel that they have no option but to listen to the diktats of the militants.

"Yes, we are scared as the ultras killed three innocent girls in the past few days. So we are not allowing even our daughters to venture out without wearing veils," said one Abdul Ganai, resident of Siote, the village which witnessed the killing of three young girls. The killing of the girls had caused a lot of resentment among the villagers.

On that fateful night, three militants had entered one house in village Siote in which a marriage ceremony was taking place in December. The ultras identified one particular girl and slaughtered her by slitting her throat. Then they entered the next house, repeating the procedure. However, when they went to another nearby house and forced the girl to accompany then with the intention to slaughter her too, her mother also followed. Resulting this, they could not slaughter her but fired at her. She died on spot. Two of the women, both aged 21, were thus slaughtered in their houses while the third woman, 22, was shot dead.

Though people of the area said these killings were linked with the diktat on dress code as posters signed by a lesser known group, Lashkar-e-Jabbar, had been appearing in educational institutions in Rajouri district asking Muslim women and girls to wear burqas and strictly follow the "purdah" system, the police denies all such reports. It said that they have recovered a handwritten poster pasted just outside a nearby mosque which read that the girls were killed as they were the informers of security forces.

But the renewed LeJ threat has also forced the police to act. They had beefed up security outside colleges and school in

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Rajouri and their men are trying to get clues about the outfit and bring the perpetrators to book.

Meanwhile, close on the heels of militants beheading three to enforce a diktat on wearing burqa, Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Toiba which had warned those selling alcohol of "severe action" if they did not stop their "un-Islamic" business immediately, killed a wine dealer in Alchi Bagh area of Srinagar city when he was returning to his home after closing the wine shop. Lashkar had put up posters at a number of places in Kulgam warning of severe action against those in wine business terming it as un-Islamic.

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3.5 Dukhtaran-e-Millat: A revolution or looking inwards?

Painted Veil

In the autumn of 2001 in Kashmir when the whole world was still to recover from the shocks of 9/11 terrorist attack, just after attending a press conference at the All Party Hurriyat Conference Headquarters at Rajbagh in the heart of Srinagar city, a burqa-clad women standing outside the Hurriyat office led most of the journalists present there to some unidentified destination. Winding past few lanes and bylanes, they were huddled to a beautiful house in the vicinity only where Asiya Andrabi- the militant chief of Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Faith) had to address a press conference. Excitement was palpable among the scribes as the "burqa campaign" unleashed by a lesser known militant group Lashkar-e-Jabbar and supported by DeM was at its peak. Besides, many of them had no knowledge about her briefing. But that's how most of the time Asiya Andrabi - the media savvy Kashmir's only women militant chief chooses the places for her press briefings – huddling journalists to some unknown destination, picking them up from various places, treating them to pastries, tea, coffee or Kashmiri Kahwa and then delivering the "goods" in

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her excellent English.

Here only I met Asiya Andrabi, 39, the burqa-clad chief of an all women militant outfit for the first time. With a small bindi on my forehead, though not adhering to the dress code "imposed" by her militant outfit for non-Muslim ladies (yellow dupatta), being the only female among dozens of local and foreign correspondents, butterflies ran in my stomach. However, my fears proved baseless when she did not comment on my dress and restricted herself to her agenda, supported Osama bin Laden and Taliban and then ultimately got into an heated argument with a foreign correspondent over 9/11 attack, justifying the act.

This was elusive Asiya Andrabi whom nobody has ever seen without a veil, except for a couple of female journalists. Recently, her organization Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM), a women's secessionist group in Jammu and Kashmir, was declared as an "unlawful" organization under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. According to the gazette notification issued by the Home Ministry, the organization "is involved in terrorist activities and banned under POTA with immediate effect".

An effective manhunt has already been launched to trace her who had been absconding ever since Imtiyaz Bazaz, editor and publisher of a Srinagar magazine Mountain Valley confessed that he had approached Dr Ayub Thakur, the London-based president of World Kashmir Freedom Movement for funneling Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) funds to the Dukhtaran-e-Millat chief.

Imtiaz Bazaz had been arrested by the police for bringing in funds to the state. Andrabi, who denied any involvement, went into hiding immediately after the case came into light as Bazaz had claimed during interrogation that she was instrumental in introducing him to Thakur. Bazaz had confessed that he had taken money on earlier occasions from former PoK prime minister and Chairman of Pakistan's Kashmir Committee

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Sardar Abdul Qayoom in early 90s.

The case against Andrabi is based on alleged intercepts of her phone conversation with Ayub Thakur. In the intercepts, Thakur and Andrabi were heard discussing ways to send money for the jihad in J&K. Cases have been registered under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) against Andrabi on charges of allegedly receiving money from the ISI through hawala channels. This followed the arrest of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, former chairman of the separatist alliance All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) on 9 June from Srinagar under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, 1978 for allegedly receiving money from the ISI through Hawala channels and for later distributing the same to different terrorist groups, including the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM).

As Andrabi's husband Qasim Faktu was the financial chief of Jamait-ul-Mujahideen (JuM), she reportedly started getting money from Ayub Thakur through Imtiaz Bazaz to provide finances to JuM as well as the DeM.

Asiya, for various reasons, has remained always in news while the other pro-separatists women organizations which surfaced in the initial years of insurgency in Kashmir valley vanished slowly and gradually. The hardcore radical Islamist that she is, Asiya always makes a good copy for any reporter. Be it her comments on her two young sons about not making them doctors or engineers but Osama bin Ladens , Saddam Husseins and Mujahideens (freedom fighters), or forcing her husband Qasim Fakhtu of Jamiait ul Mujahideen outfit to marry few widows of militants, she has always grabbed the headlines.

Justifying her stand on forcing her husband to marry widows of militants, she had told a foreign correspondent: "Allah says a man can marry one, two, three or four wives, but he must have the means to do justice to them all. The jihad against India has left so many widows and orphans. A man has a responsibility to look after them."

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What makes her an all-woman outfit, the Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM) different from other militant groups operating in Kashmir valley is the fact that her cadres have never not taken to arms so far. However, they have always supported Jihad in Kashmir and have acted as couriers and messengers for them. In all these years, her cadres have been accused of carrying a parcel bomb to the BBC Kashmir office in Pratap Park Srinagar and delivering it there which resulted in the death of ANI videographer Mustaq Ali.

Set up in 1987, Asiya has always asserted that she formed Dukhtaran-e-Millat for a social cause which is to help Kashmiri women fight for their rights. She wanted to help Kashmiri women regain their rights given to them by Islam. She tried to serve the cause by fighting for special reservations for women in buses, enforcing a social boycott of families who made dowry demands, marrying off poor girls, in many cases to Mujahideen also. Her own party's general secretary Naheeda is also married to an Al Jehad militant. However for the first time she gained limelight in March 1987 when her outfit staged a rally against pornographic film posters, plastering black paint all over them. It was the time when foreign films were being screened in almost all the theatres of Srinagar city and posters were pasted all over the city. In those days, her cadres carried brushes and paint cans beneath their burqas blackening any advertisements or posters that show scantily dressed models or actresses. However, she invited the wrath of the government which seized her office and issued warrants against her.

With the outbreak of militancy in Kashmir in 1989, her cadres restricted themselves to staging rallies and making protest demonstrations against the excesses. Besides, she was active in organizing protests against Kashmiri women who did not adhere to the burqa (veil) system in 1990. Her outfit issued warnings to women in Srinagar in May 1993 not to venture outside their houses without wearing the veil. To terrorize Kashmiri women folks and thus enforcing the diktats, her cadres threw acid and paint on the faces of women who dared

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to defy them.

After lying low for many years, she again was in limelight in 2001 when she supported a new outfit named Lashkar-e-Jabbar (LeJ) whose activists threw acid on two women in Srinagar as "they were not dressed in Islamic style." LeJ threatened to use violence against Kashmiri Muslims who were not dressed in their version of 'Islamic Dress Codes'. Asiya supported them saying that the current campaign was the "beginning of a comprehensive social reform movement based on true Islamic thought". She helped LeJ enforce the immensely unpopular campaign. She went a step further asking Kashmiri women to quit their job and stay at home as "women were to cater to kitchen while men were supposed to work". Due to this, she once again became unpopular among Kashmiri women.

Dukhtaran- e- Millat had also opposed peace initiatives in the State rejecting the cease-fire India. She even urged militants groups to take action against senior leader of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Abdul Ghani Lone for his remarks against foreign militant asking them leave valley. She warned Lone of dire consequences "in case he did not rein in his tongue" against "foreign militants and Islam." Andrabi believes that Kashmir issue is primarily a religious issue and jihad is mandatory and supports accession of the Kashmir valley with Pakistan. Her outfit primarily operates in the Kashmir valley and its present strength is reported to be approximately 350.

Founder of South Asia's only all-woman separatist group - the Dukhtaran-e-Millat was never like this. Her father was a doctor who encouraged her to get a secular education. A brilliant student, she studied biochemistry, bacteriology and diet therapy at college in Srinagar. But when she wanted to study further outside the state, her family refused to let her go. She felt as if her dreams were shattered and locked herself in her room. But then she stumbled upon a book *"Khawateen Ki Dilon Ki Baatein"* (Words from the hearts of women), a compilation of

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the writings of Islamic women revolutionaries, which changed her life. From that day she decided to live and die for Islam. She studied the Koran and encouraged other women to do the same.

So much she got engrossed into Jihad in Kashmir that she told her father that she would get married to a Mujahideen (freedom fighter) only. And she did. She married Mohammad Qasim Faktu, a Mujahideen with the militant group Jamiat-ul-Mujahadeen in 1990 at the age 27 whom she met on the wedding day only.

Both militant husband-wife duo have been arrested many times. Her husband Qasim was arrested from the IGI airport a couple of years ago with Rs 50 lakhs-allegedly Hawala money and but released after few years .Not only her husband, her brother Dr Inayat Andrabi, was chief of Jamaat-ul-Tulba - students wing of Jamaat-e-Islami. He later formed Mahaj-e-Islami after he developed difference with the Jamaat. Presently, he is in London. Besides, one of her uncles, Ghulam Mustafa Alvi, fled to Pakistan in 1965 to escape a death sentence, while another was a member of Al Fateh – valley first militant outfit formed in early 70's.

With both police and intelligence agency frantically searching for Asiya who reportedly is changing her hideouts almost every day to escape her arrest, she can open the lid from a number of such Hawala transactions if arrested, which have been taking place in Kashmir to fund various terrorist outfits. But how long she can evade her arrest, no one can tell.

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4

Pandit Women

4.1 VIOLENCE

Refugees in their own land

"Kashiri Gachka?" (Would you like to go to Kashmir?)...Her eyes shine instantly, her face glows and she becomes excited at the very mention of her homeland "Kashmir" and the mere thought of going back to her beautiful vale. Kamalawati, the septuagenarian Kashmiri Pandit woman suddenly becomes nostalgic, catches hold of my arm and comes out with an unexpected answer: *"Vien Vant Vien Gacch, Mein Ti Niz Kasheer"*. (Tell me to return right now and I'll do so. Please take me to Kashmir with you whenever you go there next").

Emotions overpower her and tears well up in her eyes. *"Lidder Ussam Wassan"* ("Lidder used to flow near my house in Pahalgam"). She makes me sad when she asks whether the Lidder river flows the same way. Is the water still cold in that gushing, magnificent river? But the next moment she shudders when she remembers that only recently, the Pakistan-sponsored mercenaries killed 36 people in Pahalgam - the village which was once her home.

Kamalawati is among the very few people of her generation who still nurse any thought of going back to the valley. Everyone else in the Nagrota migrant camp situated on Jammu-Srinagar National Highway, where Kamalavati now lives along with 800 other families, is opposed to going back to the valley. Their

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children have already left the state for better avenues, never to return again. Bitter, deeply hurt, anguish evident in their eyes, these migrants Pandits even refuse to talk about their miseries.

"You come, click photographs, shoot videos, cash our miseries and mint money. You *akhbarwallahs* (journalists) have also not done anything for us," alleges one of them. It takes quite a lot of explaining to make them understand that this is not true. The problem is that having already written a lot on the plight of the ethnic minority community from J & K, newspapers do not find anything new to report.

When violence engulfed Kashmir about 20 years ago, about three lakh Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee from their homeland where they had been living for thousands of years. As armed insurgency erupted in Valley in late 1989 and situation seemed to be slipping out of control, New Delhi sent Jagmohan as the new governor of Jammu and Kashmir on January 19, 1990. The same night all the mosques in Kashmir used public address systems asking Kashmiri Pandits to leave valley: *'Kashmir Me Agar Rehna Hoga, Allah-O-Akbar Kehna Hoga'* (If you want to stay in Kashmir, you have to say Allah-O-Akbar); *'Yahan Kya Chalega, Nizam-e-Mustafa'* (What do we want here? Rule of Shariah); *'Asi Gachchi Pakistan, Batav Ros Te Bataniv San'* (We want Pakistan along with Hindu women but without their men)....

That night not a single Kashmiri Pandit could sleep in their homes and the next morning, the exodus of Kashmiri Pandit ethnic minority had started from valley. In the preceding months, 300 Hindu men and women, nearly all of them Kashmiri Pandits, were slaughtered including Pandit Tika Lal Taploo, noted lawyer and BJP national executive member, Justice Neel Kanth Ganju of the Srinagar high court, Pandit Sarwanand Premi, 80-year-old poet and his son who were kidnapped, tortured, their eyes gouged out, and hanged to death, Lassa Kaul, the then station director of Doordarshan

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Kendra Srinagar etc.

Numerous Kashmiri Pandit women including Ms. Sarla Bhat from Qazi Mohalla in Anantnag, who was working as a nurse in the Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences, Soura was abducted from there on 19th April 1990 by the JKLF, was repeatedly gang raped and eventually killed on 25 April 1990. Mrs. Girja Tikoo from Bandipore who worked as a teacher in the Girls High School in Trehgam, Kupwara, was abducted, raped and then shred to pieces on a saw mill on 4 June 1990 while Mrs. Bimla Braroo from Nai Sarak locality of Srinagar, along with her daughter Archana, was raped in front of her husband Sohanlal before all the three were killed on 31 March 1992.

The killings made hundreds and thousands of Kashmiri Pandits flee valley. The turmoil made them homeless. Scattered all over the country; many are still living in migrant camps at Nagrota, Muthi, Mishriwalla in Jammu. Around 8,000 Kashmiri Pandits (KPs) are still living in Kashmir valley, at the mercy of the militants and, of course, their neighbours.

Staying on in the valley resisting all threats, as they did not want to live in camps as migrants in sub-human conditions, some of them have, unfortunately, fallen prey to the nefarious designs of secessionist militants. The massacre of Pandits in Telwani in Acchabal, Sangrampura and Wandhama were the most agonizing examples in the two decade.

Kashmiri Pandits are bitter today. Their homes have been burnt down, their lands taken over by the local Muslims. The Pandits had thought that the BJP- the party in which they had placed great hopes - would help them. But it failed them miserably. Even the hope that the Farooq government would work for their betterment died down. After his government came to power, Dr Farooq Abdullah tried various strategies to get the Pandits back in the Valley. From threatening to stop their

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salaries if they did not return to their homes and hearths to the state cabinet's approval of the action plan for their return as recommended by the Koul Committee (he got this committee constituted under the chairmanship of ML Koul, the then financial commissioner, planning and development, for preparing an action plan for the return of the migrants), he tried everything but Kashmiri Pandits rejected all offers.

"Pandits of the valley are no political force. They have been at the receiving end. With the powers that be looking the other way, we continue to rot in camps," says Motilal Dhar of Pulwama, who has been living in Nagrota camp. By burning down the houses and property of Pandits, he says, militants have clearly shown that they do not want their return. Property worth millions of rupees has been destroyed in the valley and over 600 temples have been damaged or destroyed in Kashmir.

Subhash Pandit, a production manager with Vyeth Television Network (producers of 'Kashmir File') negates the claims of the government of having providing relief to the migrants. His house in village Katrasoo in Kulgam tehsil in South Kashmir was gutted down in 1992. Since then he has posted over 60 registered letters to the deputy commissioner Anantnag, the SP, Anantnag and the SP, Kulgam, seeking an inquiry into the FIR which he had lodged with the Udhampur police station in the same year. But justice has eluded him so far.

The case of Amrita of village Qewa (Hirgam) in Qazigund is no different. She, too, had filed an FIR with Qazigund police station after her house was burnt down but nothing has been done so far. For her, too, there is no point in returning to the valley.

Among other things, Kashmiri Pandits are highly critical of the government's euphoria in negotiating with the separatists and militant groups especially Hizbul Mujahideen, the same militant outfit which had issued threats through local papers in early 90's, asking the KPs to leave the valley.

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"The government is talking about bringing people into the national mainstream. But what about those who are already in the mainstream? By not paying any heed to their grievances and problems, isn't the government aggravating the whole issue?" asks Rajinder Premi, son of the great Kashmiri poet, Sarwanand Koul Premi who had translated the Bhagwad Gita into Kashmiri language and kept a copy of the Quran reverently in his house for regular study but was killed by the militants along with his 27-year-old son Virendra.

Rajinder feels that it is the high time United Nations intervened and declared Pakistan a "terrorist state." "Isn't it quite inhuman to pump 16 bullets into a child's body? What's our fault? Only that we want our self-respect, our rights to be restored and we be allowed to live as respectable citizens? What more do we ask?" adds Premi.

For most of the Kashmiri Pandits, Indian diplomacy has not demonstrated the requisite firmness. They feel that the willingness to negotiate with those militant outfit which had killed many KPs dubbing them as "pro-Indians" and "*mukhbirs*" (informers), while the patriotic citizens were butchered, has only demonstrated the government's weakness. No initiative to the resolution of the Kashmir problem would be acceptable which does not take into consideration the socio–political aspirations of Hindus of Kashmir and the people of Jammu and Ladakh, they feel.

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4.2 Uprooting, Camp life

Shattered dreams, lost hopes

Behind Vasdev's barely closed eyelids, dreams break violently....the usual dreams...the dreams of returning to his native place in Kashmir valley, to his apple, walnut and almond orchards stretched across the miles...the dreams of basking in

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the Sun...the Sun of his Kashmir valley, in the land where his ancestors had been living for centuries till he was hounded out of the Valley by the Islamic extremists. Spending every single moment of his frail life in these past years remembering his native place with a burning desire to go back to his roots may not seem to be very easy thing for this septuagenarian, but this is what has kept him going. Otherwise, the man who has been rendered alone in this world (his relatives died in all these years) would have lost the will to live long ago. Mention the prospectus of his return to Kashmir valley and "Vasu Toth", as he is lovingly known in Mishriwalla refugee camp (the second largest refugee camp for Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu region), situated near the Akhnoor border, becomes nostalgic. His eyes fill up with great hope - the hope of returning to his village one day whose memories haunts him night and day.

A native of Mujmarg, a picturesque village in Shopian tehsil of Pulwama district of Kashmir valley in South Kashmir, the man who possessed a five storeyed house and orchards besides a huge expanse of agricultural land, now spends his days while sipping *Hukka,* a habit that has continued since past seventy years now. The dark dingy lanes of Mishriwalla refugee camps which hardly provide enough space for even two persons to walk across them simultaneously, lead us to his one room house .Having enjoyed the salubrious climate in his village amidst popular, willow, apple, almond and walnut trees, "Vasu Totta" does not yearn much...only he wants to sit in the sun but not even a single ray of sunlight can filter through this dark small room as the One Room Tenements (ORT) constructed by the state government in the KP migrant camps, have no windows at all. All Vasdev wants is to pluck an apple from the tree in his orchard and eat it but in this camp, there is not even a bush around, not to talk of an apple tree. Perhaps a prison could have been better than his caged room in Mishriwalla refugee camp.

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"*Yeti Chum Safar, Teti Osum Aaram* (Here I am in transit, there I was in much comfort)," says Vasdev in his Kashmiri. Driven by the urge to be in touch with Mother Nature, despite his failing health and poor eyesight, he has now grown vegetables in his small 9 feet by 14 feet piece of land as has been provided to each KP refugee in the Mishriwalla camp.

Vasdev is among the people of their generation who nurse the thought of going back to the valley. But perhaps not everybody. Bitterness, anguish and pain have filled their hearts and minds in all these years. Hoping against hope, many of their generation have died in the past decade with the dream of returning to their land dying in their eyes. Fear, uncertainty and apprehension are palpable among hundreds and thousands of refugees who are put in various camps in and around Jammu city for the past over two decades now.

Nothing has changed much for over 3.5 lakh Kashmiri Pandits since their exodus from valley. Those who belonged to better strata of society migrated to better places like Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore but those who had not option were put up in refugee camps. The affluent members of the community have been able to construct good houses and make a decent living for themselves. They have managed to find private jobs in addition to the salaries which they have been getting from the state government.

The worst sufferers are the people who were living in villages in the valley and were mostly landowners. For them, to eke out a living out of the Rs 3,500 which they have been getting from the state government as a relief is just not enough for a family of five. The windowless one-room tenements given to each family in most of the camps at Muthi, Nagrota and Mishriwalla and Purkhoo have roofs made of asbestos sheets. When the temperature goes up to 47 degrees in summer, the tenements are like furnaces.

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The sense of deprivation, distrust, hurt, anguish and alienation is evident among the displaced Kashmiri Pandits today. To make them even talk about their sufferings is a gigantic task. But the fault is not theirs. Their vengeance is due to the repeated denials to the requests for the redressal of their problems that they have been facing for so many years now. But nobody cares for them. Rendered into a territory-less minority within their own country has hurt their psyche, says Dr Agnishekher, convenor Panun Kashmir, the frontline organization of displaced Kashmiri Pandits which has been fighting for the rights of Kashmiri Pandits besides demanding a separate homeland within South Kashmir for Kashmiri Pandits.

All these decades have been the long years of their rootlessness and nomadic existence; a life of travail and deprivations and perpetuation of denial of their fundamental rights. Struggle for their survival in the face of apathy and callousness of the administration has been too hard on them.

Conditions in refugee camps have been sub-human. Lack of healthcare, hygiene, education and other facilities has now slowly and gradually started reflecting on their personalities. Initially put up in tents for six long years in places like Muthi, Nagrota, Mishriwalla, Jhiri, Purkhoo and Batal Ballian in Udhampur, these refugees in their own land were then settled in ORTs in the camps only. But with no proper facilities. On an average, five persons live in a small One-Room Tenement provided to each family in the camps but the roofs leak as the ceilings have developed cracks.

Cluster of small, dingy rooms are suffocating. In no way, the place is worth living. Many a times, people have fallen in the drains due to lack of electricity, as the narrow lanes are too difficult to tread. The problems are manifold. Each family in a camp has harrowing story to narrate; each person is having a gigantic problem but no solution at all.

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In Mishriwalla refugee camp alone, there are ten hand pumps for a population of 500 families (2500 people). Last year, the water from these pumps had developed revolting smell and had some worms also. But nobody cared."We are living in concentration camps," says Dr Agnishekher adding that even Afghan refugees will certainly be having better facilities as many countries including the United Nations helping them out 'but in our own country, our own countrymen have forgotten our plight and cause'.

"We have around 500 children in this camp but not a single playground." says Ashok Kumar, a health department employee who hailed from Lolab Valley in border district of Kupwara situated close to the Line of Control in North Kashmir. Conditions of camps is same everywhere, be it Nagrota, Mishriwalla or Purkhoo.

Living in sub-humane existence in camps, deprived of the very basic needs of the life, little children are growing in filth and squalor, the youth are discriminated against in education and employment and have lapsed into depression and despair. Surender, son of Leelwati of Magam in Kashmir who now lives in Mishriwalla camp, had gone to Delhi after his graduation for further studies but could not go for it, as he had no money. His mother Leelawati has aged prematurely. Not only she, but also most of the women in camps are under tremendous stress and are the worst sufferers. The communal carnage, the forced exodus, the changed milieu, alien and hostile environment along with a torn social fabric, poor shelter, lack of privacy and security has resulted in serious health traumas.

Hundred per cent of the exiled Kashmiri Pandit women are afflicted with health syndrome. The old and the infirm have met a premature death for want of health and family support. A large number have suffered mental breakdown due to stress, terror, violence, and genocide. Behavioral syndromes, psychological disorders, depression, panic attacks and phobias

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have seized all age groups. The turbulence in Jammu and Kashmir has taken a heavy toll on the Kashmiri Pandit families.

Dr KL Chowdhary, renowned physician and Panun Kashmir, leader informs that most of the KPs have developed heart problems only after migration. The loss of their property and the lives of near and dear ones is also being reflected in their premature ageing. Besides, there are a number of other problems — increasing unemployment among the KP youth, deteriorating reproductive health among KP females, low birth rate, inhuman conditions in migrant camps ... the list is long. According to him, the most alarming phenomenon has been a very high occurrence of ovarian failure and premature menopause leading to an alarmingly reduced fertility span, resulting in a negative growth. This has been further accentuated by a high death rate, unnatural deaths, premature ageing, low birth rate due to undesired contraception, elective abortions, late marriages, sexual deprivations due to stress and lack of privacy and reduced conception due to reduced sexual desire.

"The lack of basic necessities in the camps has caused havoc in the whole mental makeup of KPs and it has indeed threatened out basic existence as a community," said Dr Choudhary.

There has been a steep increase in diabetes cases in the community notwithstanding the fact that there is hardly any family history of the disease among Kashmiri Pandits. The diabetologists believe that the presence of high levels of blood sugar can be attributed to the constant stress that KPs have been facing after their exodus from the Valley. Since migration is accompanied by stress, which increases the incidence of diabetes in the Kashmiri Pandit population, the marital stress among migrant couples has also been identified as an independent factor placing both husband and the wife at additional risk for developing diabetes.

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Dwindling population: What is most startling is the fact that the population of Kashmiri Pandits is declining fast and the community is faced with extinction. The reason is simple-a decrease in birth rate and increase in death rate in the community. Long separation of spouses, reduced sexuality, and higher divorces rates in exile due to the strains and stresses of camp life, have led to falling birth rates. Dr Choudhary predicts a fast dwindling ethnic minority keeping in view this decreased birth rate. This is the most serious problem facing the community today as its battles for its very survival.

Dr Choudhary who has conducted a massive study in post-migration period in migrant camps reveals that there is premature aging; death rate is increasing while the birth rate is very low. People do not marry early in migrant camps, as they do not have jobs, accommodation etc. The KP intellectuals and leaders even apprehend that if such a trend continues at this pace only, one day the community may cease to exist. The death rate in Kashmiri Pandit Community is 13 per cent while the birth rate is just 3 per cent.

But that is not the only problem. The marriage age for KP boys has increased from mid-twenties to early or mid-thirties as they lack opportunities to settle down and support a family. Girls do not get proper matches, and hence delay and rise in inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. Further, married couples have very low conjugal life due to lack of privacy with 6-7 members sleeping in the same room in the refugee camps. Due to overcrowding, couples rarely share private moments and do not develop physical or emotional bonds. Interference by in-laws further alienates them from each other.

Increase in divorce rates is another big issue. In the Valley divorces in the community were unknown, but are now quite common. Migration has exposed them to different cultures and to materialistic values. Divorce petitions filed by Kashmiri Pandits have increased by 35-40 per cent, according to officials

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in the matrimonial court of Jammu and Kashmir. In 1995, 250 divorce petitions were filed in the state, of which 30 applications were from Kashmiri Pandits. In 2001, the number increased to 976 divorce petitions with Pandits accounting for 300. In 2002, out of 600 divorce petitions filed, 200 were from Pandits in the age group 25-40 years.

Also inter-caste marriages of KP boys and girls in rest of the country are gaining momentum. This is something new in a conservative set up of Kashmiri Pandits. Nuclear families are on the rise; even inter-religion marriages are on rise. Hundreds of Kashmiri Pandit girls have gone to Maharashtra and other states for higher education and entered into such marriages. These migrant women find it difficult to cope with the scattering of their community. Some are settled in Delhi; some have shifted to far off places with hardly any chance to meet each other, which has isolated the elderly women, who have nobody to talk to. Kashmiri youth are going to various parts of the country, leaving their elders behind. This also perturbs the family since the older people are forced to live alone in the absence of their children.

But what have been the reasons for the denial of their rights to them? Dr Agnishekher says that as they are a small community, their shrieks and cries do not matter both to the Centre and the state governments. The KPs entering 20th year of their exile and living as refugees in their own country is a blot on the face of the largest democracy of the world, he adds. Had they been on their vote banks, governments would have done anything for them, echoes Dr Choudhary. Besides, he feels that the media has also failed to project their cause and it has played to the pseudo-secularists. These refugee camps, he says, are the blisters on the face of India secularism".

What pains them most is that despite repeated requests of granting them refugee status or Internally Displaced People (IDP) Status, their requests have fallen on the deaf ears. The

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United Nations had passed IDP Act in 1994. Ironically India too has been one of its signatories. The IDP status empowers the displaced community in terms of international humantarian aid. But they have been denied even that.

"A refugee psyche has developed amongst us. We have been subjected to a religious persecution. Apprehensions, insecurity, uncertainty, depression, characteristic of slavery syndrome are rampant," says Dr Choudhary.

Dr Agnishekhar believes there are some core issues which need to be addressed before the Pandits' return to the valley. This entails a broad range of planning once the core issues are addressed. The ground realities of security environment in the valley have to be seriously and thoroughly addressed. Pandits, he says, cannot be coerced into returning in an environment of danger and uncertainly. Nor they will accept transit settlements in the valley as envisaged by the government. "The task of geopolitical restructuring of the state, carving of a homeland within Kashmir, UT status for Ladakh and separate statehood for Jammu, therefore remain crucial not only for the return of KPs but to the territorial integrity and security of India as well," Agnishekhar maintains.

The problem however remains that the sordid tale of KPs is being listened to and addressed by none at present because nobody finds it to their benefit and interest. Kashmiri Pandits are disillusioned now as never before. After all, it is the question of survival for the fast declining population of the KP community.

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4.3 Education

Survival against the odds

From the salubrious environs of her village nestled in the foothills

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of Anantnag district in Zalangam, South Kashmir, getting uprooted and settling in a tented colony in the outskirts of Jammu city in Nagrota in the scorching, blistering heat of the plains was no easy for Sunita Kaul, all of 14 years. Leaving her entire belongings, her friends in the neighbourhood and her life to flee to Jammu in the middle of one dark night in early 1990 with her parents was a harsh reality that she could never reconcile with.

After landing in Jammu and staying in Gita Bhavan temple for few months, Sunita didn't know for the first few months what she was supposed to do, since she saw everyone around in complete disillusionment. Then her family shifted to Nagrota Migrant camp in tents and finally few migrant schools were put in place, which she started attending. The summer (post-monsoon) heat was so scorching that once she went to a nearby temple terrace to study, had one encounter with a snake there, and on another instance brought one home in her school bag, to be discovered by her mother the next morning when her daughter was preparing to go to school again. (Over 1000 Kashmiri Pandits died due to sunstroke, snakebites in refugee camps at Jammu and Delhi).

Years passed, and she passed exams too, but percentage, on account of the circumstances, fell quite often. The girl is now well placed, but not as well placed as she would have expected, had she got proper, comfortable education.

Coping up with harsh post-April 1990 summer, hundreds of such young Kashmiri Pandits girls had to undergo more mental turmoil than the physical one as their lives came to standstill as education got discontinued initially.

Perhaps not a single Kashmiri Pandit family in Kashmir could remain unaffected by the armed insurgency which took its roots in early nineties. This was also the period when the world witnessed the exodus of ethnic Kashmiri Pandit community

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from their homeland Kashmir. In 1990, the year of holocaust, as the KPs put it; all regular educational institutions were closed for Kashmiri students. But for a KP, any student from any other state could get admission in a regular school at Jammu without any hassle. Makeshift arrangements for migrant students were arranged under tented accommodation in the scorching heat without any fan, toilet and drinking water facilities.

Degree classes for migrant students were arranged in Government Science College and MAM College Jammu. Migrant students were registered with the Kashmir University. During the peak of militancy in early nineties, the three-year academic year got stretched to six to seven years. Most of the migrant students at Jammu got exhausted and lost interest in studies.

Though Kashmiri Pandit youth suffered badly due to displacement from Kashmir valley twenty years ago, yet the major impact of turmoil could be seen on those young boys and girls who lived in migrant camps than those who acquired private accommodation in various parts of Jammu and Delhi and few other cities of the country much later.

Most of those Pandit families who had to take shelter in government's migrant camps were those who had no major resources for sustenance. Hence, migrants living in migrant camps had lower literacy rates than those living in the non-camp areas and the females fared the worst, as per a report on the "Impact of migration on the socio-economic conditions of Kashmiri displaced people" conducted by J&K Centre for Minority Studies(J&K CMS).

"Discontinuation of education due to inaccessibility of the educational institute/ economic reasons and other socio-cultural factors was pronounced in the migrant camps where the families were mostly from the agricultural/business and self-employed sections", the report says. The research undertaken

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for studying the impact of violence on KP girls education clearly reveals that there has been a significant variation among the camp and non-camp students (the affluent ones who constructed their house or rented the accommodation but did not stay inside the tented colonies set up for the migrant Pandits which were later converted to One Room Tenements-ORTs).

Conditions in refugee camps which were set up at Muthi, Nagrota, Mishriwalla, Jhiri, Purkhoo in Jammu and Batal Ballian in Udhampur, have always were sub-human. Lack of healthcare, hygiene, education and other facilities, slowly and gradually, started reflecting on their education too.

The literacy rate in camp localities was only 56 % for males and 40 % for females. Families with rural and urban background in the camps depicted significant variations in the proportion of educated and trained population. In the camp locations, female literacy rate was 49 % for families with some urban origin and only 37 % for families with rural origin in the post migration period in March 2002. Only 11 % of children reach graduation level out of which hardly 3 % became graduates. The avenues for higher education were less among families dwelling in camps as compared to families living in non-camp localities.

Immediately after migration, though the Kashmiri Pandit community suffered badly education-wise, but after few years, the students were able to cope up to some extent, says Dr. Agnishekher, Panun Kashmir chairman.

Even the CMS findings show that the percentage of the students who discontinued after the migration due to inaccessibility of educational institutions, financial crunch and other socio-economic and cultural factors, in the age group 6-18 years and those in 18-24 years for graduation and post-graduation and professional studies was worked out at 8 % for boys and 11% for girls at school level and 24 % for boys and 30 % for girls at

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college level and about 1 % each for boys and girls at post-graduation and professional level.

Again, there was a sharp difference in the discontinuation levels among the camp and non-camp students.

"The discontinuation of education for both the boys and girls from camps localities was as high at 24 % for boys and 43 % for girls at school level; 65 % for boys and 74% for girls at college level and 2 5 for boys and girls each at post-graduation and professional training level, "says the Centre for Minorities Studies report.

The forced exodus, a torn social fabric, lack of privacy and security, economic distress, loss of interest among students due to non-availability of jobs, inaccessibly of appropriate education environment in the vicinity, the institutional confusion because of the change of the University, the cussed attitude of the Kashmir University and inflexibility and lack of sympathy of the state government to allow flexibility of jurisdiction resulted in discontinuation of education among Kashmiri Pandits. The youth were discriminated against in education and employment and they lapsed into psychological and mental diseases including depression, anxiety disorders, and personality syndromes. However, what came to the rescue of such migrant students were the reservations made by the Government of Maharashtra in various professional seats in the state.

The students interested in engineering seats outside the state could manage admissions in Mahrashtra. When the compulsory primary education was denied to KP students in J&K, this state opened the gates of the choicest engineering and Medical Colleges for the KP children. Following this, Karnataka also became the first state in the country to allot Medical and Dental seats besides engineering seats to the wards of Kashmiri Pandit migrants. And things started improving for the students of the community.

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Says Dr. K.L Chowdhury, chairman, Political affairs, Panun Kashmir: "In spite of the difficult circumstances, education has been our main focus, be it girls or boys. If you visit a refugee camp and enter any one-room tenement, you will not miss a study corner in that multi-purpose room where you may have three generations living together."

"All you have is the family support; the state has not provided even the basic infrastructure for education of the displaced lot. I remember the tent schools which would be blown off with the first storm of summer, where you had a ramshackle black board and no place for the girls to sit except the bare, uneven, rocky ground", says Dr Chowdhary.

Of course, since then the Pandits have moved on. They had no option. They sold their properties back home in the valley to generate finances for educating their children. Because of the violence in Kashmir, KP girls also got an unexpected exposure. They can be seen everywhere in the country working in corporate sector

Dr Chowdhury also feels that opening of educational portals in some states like Mahrashtra was a great gesture of goodwill and that was a strong incentive for the youth to work hard and get into professional colleges. He adds the KPs girls are now marching shoulder to shoulder with the boys and even faring better in various disciplines. They are in medicine, engineering, journalism, acting, modeling, law, IT, aviation, police etc.

"I feel one silver streak in the dark clouds of having been forced into displacement as there has been a spurt in the already education-minded community of Kashmiri Pandits," he says.

Few years back, he even wrote a poem "Camp School" in his anthology, 'Of Gods, Men and Militants' (Minerva India (Pvt) Ltd. 2000) which goes as following:-

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In the wild outskirts of the city,
On a barren piece of land at Muthi,
Five tattered tents each twelve feet by twenty,
Flapping in the wind, holding tenuously,
Make our school for a hundred and thirty.
The only furniture or upholstery
Is a bare blackboard, solitary,
Rough and ridged and rickety,
That refuses to be writ upon
With any chalk, coloured or white,
Hard, soft or powdery
The 'migrant' teachers try their best
With words, gestures and pantomime
But often leave the class in disgust
As the wind blows hot, the sun peeps through
Or the rains seep in to flood the school
And the skin smarts and burns with the 'loo'.
But that doesn't dampen our spirits
In this veritable laboratory
Where the briar and bush is our botany,
The insects and worms our zoology,
The sand and stones our geology,
The elements our physics and chemistry,
Mother Nature our library
And we ourselves the history
Ours is not just a camp school,
But a mini open university

Few facts and figures regarding KPs

- Over 3.5 lakh Kashmiri Pandits forced to leave valley in 1990.
- Over 1200 KPs including few Sikhs killed, maimed and tortured by terrorists in most inhumane ways.
- Over 800 KPs died due to sunstroke, snakebites in refugee

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camps at Jammu and Delhi

- More than 10,000 KPs are still living in sub-humane conditions in camps for want of better accommodation
- Over 27,000 residential houses, business establishments, shops, small scale industries, educational razed to the ground.
- A total of 110 shops out of 143 shops illegally occupied in Srinagar city alone.
- Over 600 Hindu shrines and temples including Uma Nagri (Brari Angan), Kathleshwan Mandir, Raghunath Mandir, Bhairav Mandir burnt down by the terrorists in Kashmir.

Refugee camps in Jammu province

- *Muthi camp Phase I and phase II
- *Purkhoo camp phase I, II,III and IV
- *Nagrota camp, phase II and I
- *Kathua camp
- *Battal Ballian camp, Udhampur

Massacres of Kashmiri Pandits in Valley

- Nadimarg Massacre, 24 March, 2003 (A massacre of 24 KPs)
- Massacre at Wandhama - March 1998 (A Massacre of 23 Kashmiri Pandits)
- Massacre at Sangrampora – 22 March 1997 (A Massacre of 7 Kashmiri Pandits)

Diseases among Kashmiri Pandits/ Percentage

Diabetes ———————— 48.0

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Asthma ———————— 21.0

Blood pressure ——————— 50.0

Mental Disorder ——- 13.28

Cardiac problems——18.4

Anemia ———————— 15.2

Lungs and throat ——12.0

Three major epidemics have occurred in the exiled KP population since the exodus:

1. 1991-92. An epidemic of drug-resistant typhoid in Jammu in nine per cent population.

2. 1994. Dengue epidemic in Jammu afflicting nearly seven thousand refugees.

3. 1997-98 Hepatitis-E epidemic in Jammu affected nearly 1500 refugees.

(Source-Panun Kashmir and Youngs India, a UNICEF aided NGO)

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5

Gujjar Women

5.1 Violence

Gunning for peace

As dusk approaches and birds wing in from the distance to roost, Munira Begum shuts the door of her small house and sets about preparing dinner. Just as she gets a fire going, there's a knock on the door. Instantly, this young tribal Muslim Gujjar picks up a gun kept near the chulha and, despite a pounding heart, remembers to cock the weapon and keep a finger on the trigger. Her state of preparedness isn't uncalled for because the hills around are infested with terrorists and a knock on any door after dusk inevitably brings terror and fear in its wake for the poor villagers. For this is the time terrorists - mostly foreigners - operating in the Hill Kaka ranges in Surankote tehsil near the Line of Control in the border district of Poonch in Jammu come calling for food, shelter and other comforts.

As the knocking grows louder, Munira Begum steels herself to take on unwelcome visitors. Previously, she would have had no choice but to offer gun-toting militants food and fulfill all their other demands. No longer. She has now chosen to live with dignity and honour. Getting closer to the door, she asks sternly, "Who is it?" "Me," comes the reply, "open the door." She is greatly relieved. It's the voice of a neighbour, Reshma Bi, who has some emergency work with her. Interestingly, Reshma Bi also has a gun slung on her shoulder,

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insurance for the half-kilometre trek to Munira's house.

For much too long, Munira and the other women of the twin villages of Marah-Kulali in Surankote in Jammu province faced the brunt of terrorism and remained its worst victims. Now the yearning for peace, the desire to lead normal lives, has forced these Gujjar women to take up arms against terrorism. They have formed an all-women brigade – the Village Defence Committee, the first in all of Jammu and Kashmir – such is their desire for peace and dignity.

The scene in Marah-Kulali is very different from that in other villages. As you walk the serpentine road that climbs to the twin villages, you see tall, slender Muslim Gujjar women sporting rifles as they stand on their rooftops. Indeed, the rifles make a strangely pleasant contrast with the babies they also carry. These women warriors get together and even lay ambushes on routes that offer ingress to their cluster. Traversing the woods, these armed women also escort fellow villagers to a water mill to grind the grain and police the areas around their homes.

"Aawane sann te mengne sann roti, gusal vaste paani, Pepsi. Asan bada mushqil waqat dekhya," (For all these years, we witnessed turbulent times and suffered badly in these areas as terrorists would come to our houses and demand all kinds of things - food, shelter, hot water for bathing, Pepsi, etc," says Munira Begum in her Gojri dialect. The excesses committed by foreign terrorists against civilians, their sexually assaulting the local women, proved too much. Many locals were being forced to work as porters without payment, women and minor girls were being raped and locals' money, assets and resources were being usurped.

"When it became too unbearable, we took up arms for self protection. When the militants used to descend on our houses, we would dread them for we wanted to live in peace and

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with dignity and not under the shadow of their guns. At times, they would physically harass our daughters and daughter-in-laws, not to talk of the mental agony our women faced. Any opposition meant rape or killing of our family members," says 50-year-old Saden Bi, who is Munira Begum's mother-in-law.

"They would come to our houses, ask the men folk to go outside. They would beat them up if they resisted; the dignity and honour of our daughters were at stake. Every time they forced our men to leave the house, we would fear for their lives - whether they would come back alive or not. There was lot of uncertainty in our lives."

These Muslim women were left with no choice but to fulfill all the demands of the Islamic militants. Most of them had husbands working in Saudi Arabia and they lived alone in these villages. Many of their male members were also working in Surankote and Poonch towns.

"Most of the men of this area are working in Gulf countries. For all these years, the terrorists would come and seek favours from these women. Any refusal meant a killing of innocents," says Mr. Shiv Darshan Singh Jamwal, Deputy Inspector General of Police, J&K Police who has served the area extensively, first as an SSP and then as a DIG looking after both the border districts of Poonch and Rajouri, adding that three years ago, a local priest was killed by the terrorists because he resisted his wife's rape. Around the same time, an old man in the same area was killed when he objected to militants snatching a lamb from the flock he was grazing. Again, an elderly woman who was cooking for terrorists who had forced their way into her house was killed when she asked them to put their guns away.

"That was a turning point. Many men from these villages who were in Saudi Arabia, including the slain priest's brother,

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went to the holy shrine of Mecca and promised to avenge these killings," says Jamwal. They returned and helped the security forces constitute the first ever-Muslim Village Defence Committee in Poonch. This was also the time when the Army had launched Operation *Sarpvinash* in the Hill Kaka area to flush out militants who had set up one of the biggest hideouts ever discovered in the 20-year insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. The gravity of the situation can well be gauged from the fact that

The Army had to use artillery fire in this operation which accounted for at least 150 foreign militants.

Immediately thereafter, militants massacred 14 villagers in Kulali in April 2004. Another attack followed in June the same year which was, however, repulsed by Khatoon Begum whose son had taught her to handle a .303 rifle. Though she died in the attack, she helped save many villagers. And so the security

Forces felt a strong need to provide these villagers with some sort of self-defence set-up that could act as a force multiplier.

"Besides, the womenfolk of the area, long used to being mute sufferers of terrorism, also made up their minds to fight. They showed their willingness to get weapons training," says Colonel Dinesh K Badola of the Nagrota-based 16 Corps. Thus was formed the first women's Village Defence Committee of Marah-Kulali and it has become a role model for other emerging local forces. This VDC is now part of the security grid that fights terrorism in villages situated close to the Line of Control that witness infiltration and movement of terrorists from across the border.

This all-woman VDC provides security arrangements for any civil gathering or national or political event, keeps track of any stranger and unauthorized person entering the village and keeps a check on all activity. Even the children and the

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elderly show a willingness to tackle militants. There are 3,770 VDCs functioning in Jammu and Kashmir and all members are equipped with arms like .303s, self-loading and

Bolt-action rifles, the one in Marah-Kulali have so far remained the only women-staffed set-up. The VDCs were started in Jammu's remote militant-infested areas in the mid-1990s following a number of massacres. The idea was to equip the villagers with arms and ammunition so that they could repulse militant attacks till security forces arrived.

Operating shoulder to shoulder with the police and the Army in the area to secure hearth and home, Marah-Kulali's VDC, like all the others, is also well-trained, has excellent fighting capabilities and knows the local terrain. All its women warriors know how to handle weapons. There seems to be a process of evolution in self-defence among these village women who have been the victims of terrorism for long now.

Indeed, the courage of these long-suffering victims of terrorism is rubbing off on the others. "Our girls fire well; they know how to handle weapons. Even young girls are quite enthusiastic about learning how to handle weapons. In every way, it has empowered us," says Saden Bi. Now militants do not dare enter their villages.

The feeling of empowerment is not lost on Taslima Bi. As she demonstrates filling a rifle-magazine like a trained soldier, her eyes light up in clear indication of how the gun has increased her sense of security. All the women handle .303s, which are much heavier than automatic weapons, with great ease. But they now want to be given AK-47s and SLRs.

"They serve as eyes and ears of the security forces and have made a tremendous contribution in clearing the higher reaches of Surankote from militants," says Mr. Jamwal adding that the training of VDC members is organised on a regular basis at security force company posts and they are now proving to

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be a vital force in anti-militancy operations. "Perhaps, they are the only ones in the area who have shown the people the way to living with dignity and honour without any compromises."

Colonel Dinesh Badola agrees. The women living south of the Pir Panjal mountains have, undoubtedly, given a new dimension to anti-militancy operations, he says. Security forces' personnel, however, inform that since women picked up the gun the threat perception to the villagers has increased. No longer are ultras getting the comforts they demanded earlier. And when they have tried to target the villagers, they have faced stiff resistance. The gun-toting women have often repulsed many a militant attack.

"Once I was cooking when the terrorists came. I fired and they ran away," says Munira Begum.

On another occasion, a group of ultras swooped on the village at a time when there were only five or six women, and they were repulsed. In fact, one terrorist was injured, says Noor Mohammed, headman of Marah village.

Two years ago, militants attacked a family in Teli Katha, Surankote, after the men had left for work. To their surprise, three women stood their ground for over an hour and forced the militants to flee. Though 13 civilians were killed, the women saved many children and elderly.

"Earlier, the Army and police trained our women, but now we train more women and girls as most of us know how to handle weapons," says Noor Mohammed, adding that the Army's presence in the recent past has also added to peace in the area.

Peace for the women here means life without any sexual assault, torture, rape and the gunning down of their men folk. Peace also means schools for their children and jobs for

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their unemployed. A beginning in this direction has already been made as the army has given Reshma Bi's son a job in a Territorial Army Battalion.

A road has been constructed connecting these inaccessible villages to Surankote, a playground has been built and an Army school might soon be opened here. The women of Marah-Kulali have succeeded in bringing about welcome change to the extent that the idea of setting up more women VDCs is fast catching on.

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Braveheart

Since the day she was born in a small sleepy village 19 years ago, Rukhsana Kausar lived a routined life in Upper Kalsi, a small hamlet situated close to the Line of Control in border district of Rajouri in Jammu province. Belonging to the tribal Gujjar community which is mostly nomadic but many of them have adopted a semi-nomadic lifestyle and have started sedentary lives, Rukhsana lived in a highly traditional and conservative society where opportunities for even boys are limited, not to talk about girls of the ethnic group. For these reasons only, she had to quit her studies after class 10 and now used to help her mother in the daily chores at home.

Given the remoteness of the area, the limited opportunities people had, the militancy which compounded their problems and the tribal community already facing other many problems like backwardness etc, never ever could Rukhsana dream about any change in their life. But as they say, everything is destined. Her destiny was about to change her life forever.

In the pitch dark of the night of 27 September 2009, a knock at the door of her uncle Waqalat Hussain startled everybody. Three militants entered Hussain's house and forced him to lead them to his elder brother Noor Hussain's adjoining house. More

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knocks at the doors of Noor Hussain in the middle of the night but as the people of the entire state faced with militancy are quite familiar with the meaning of middle night knocks at their doors; he did not open the door.

Angered, the three ultras broke open the door and entered his house. By then Noor and his wife Rashida Begum had hidden their only daughter Rukhsana beneath a cot. Both the patriarchs - Waqalat Hussain and Noor Hussain- knew well that their Gujjar community had already suffered a lot due to militancy. The Gujjars, most of them who live in these militancy-infested villages or even those who go to the higher mountain reaches with their flocks of sheep in search of pastures in the remote grasslands of the Pir Panjal Mountains, know that the philandering ultras often seek food and shelter from them. Instances are galore wherein the young Gujjar girls haven't escaped from their lustful eyes. Besides asking for food and shelter, the militants exploit their women folk.

Militancy has transformed the lives of the tribal Gujjar community especially those leading nomadic lives and who have made their living tending herds of sheep and goats and spends the winters in the valleys. When the snows melt and passes open, they set off on their annual journey to the higher reaches of the Pir Panjal mountains where their flocks graze all through summer. Militants in transit use their traditional pastures. Gujjars leading nomadic lives are quite vulnerable to bullets of the militants. In the past few years, many Gujjars, both men and women, have been massacred by the terrorists in the upper reaches and also in the *Dhoks* (mud houses) in which they live.

In the initial years, their women were the victims of the militants' lust. Later, due to resistance, the militants turned against them and started killing Gujjar women accusing them of being informers of the police and security forces. Many such cases have been reported. The Gujjar community had to obey

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the militants to provide them food and shelter, and find themselves caught between the militants and security forces. Now many have stopped going to the higher reaches. Many Gujjar women were also massacred by the terrorists in the past two decades of bloodshed. To fight the militants, for the first time, Muslim women in Rajouri, most of them Gujjars, had even formed a Village Defense Committee-VDC- in Kurali village of Rajouri.

This time also, the three terrorists demanded Rukhsana be handed over to them to satisfy their lust. When her parents and younger brother Aijaz tried to resist, the militants started hitting them with rifle butts. Anguished over this torture being inflicted upon her family, Rukhsana emerged from her hiding place with an axe and hit the LeT commander on his head One of the militants opened fire, injuring Waqalat Hussain in his arm but her other family members too joined in battling the militants. Rukhsana picked up the commander's gun and snatched another from the other militant and threw it to her brother. She shot the commander Abu Osama, a dreaded terrorist of Lashkar-e-Taiba, killing him on spot. Both brother-sister duo fired on the other militants forcing them to flee. The duo then led their family to the Shahdara Sharif police post and handed over the weapons.

Had Ruksana not shown this daredevil act and rare bravery, her entire family too would have been eliminated by the ultras. She not only saved her entire family from the clutches of dreaded Lashkar-e-Toiba militants but her own life changed forever. A special police post was set up at Noor Hussain's house and brother-sister duo was offered jobs as Special Police Officers. But she declined the offer for she feared her life in J&K and wanted a job in paramilitary force in New Delhi.

Rukhsana, who had never picked up a rifle before that incident, was the talk of the town. She was honored by various organizations for her bravery but the biggest recognition came

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from the Government of India when she was awarded Kirti Chakra on 25 January 2010, the second highest gallantry award in peacetime. The J&K government also gave her cash award. She also got National Bravery Award by the Centre, Rani Jhansi bravery award in Jaipur, Sardar Patel Award etc. Maulana Amir Mohammad Shamsi, head preacher of Alhuda Jamia Masjid, Rajouri congratulated her saying that it was real jihad. Shahdara Sharief shrine administrator Inayat Hussain Baba said Rukhsana had sent an example for others to emulate.

A Tamil movie dedicated to brave Rukhsana Kausar was also announced by film director Geetha Krishna hailing her as one of the bravest women India has seen lately.

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Massacres of Gujjars:

1. June 2004 : 12 Gujjars killed at Marah Surankote,Poonch
2. May 2003 : 6 Gujjars killed at Keri, Rajouri
3. May 2003 : 5 Gujjars killed at Pati Aragam, Baramulla
4. August 2002 : 7 Gujjars killed in Kupwara
5. May 2001 : 10 Shepherds killed near Kishtwar,Doda
6. May 2001 : 7 Gujjars killed at Darasangla, Surankote, Poonch
7. March 2001 : 8 Gujjars killed at Atholi Doda
8. February 2001 : 5 Gujjars killed in Bhandrai Taryath, Udhampur
9. January 2001 : 15 Bakerwal Gujjars killed at Kote Chadwal, Rajouri
10. March 2000 : 5 Gujjars killed at Pathribal,Anantnag

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5.2 Education

That elusive chalk

Fatima Bi is walking non-stop for the past five hours. Clad in salwar and kurti (shirt) and Tazakastani cap with various hair braids, she finds absolutely no trouble carrying her young infant on her back tied with a piece of long cloth. But for the stout, tough and beautiful women of this tribe-Gujjars and Bakerwals-this is a routine. Since she was born, Fatima Bi has seen her mother and other women of the clan follow the same routine. Moving along with the horses, Fatima Bi, other ladies and children, flocks of sheep and goats and hunting dogs who protect animals from thieves and wild animals are coming down from the higher reaches near Zalangam, Kokernag in South Kashmir. And as she stops at the village grocery shop for a puff of "Beedi"(few women of the tribe are fond of this variety of smoking), few minutes are enough to catch up with her and other tribal ladies and find out more about them.

Most of the months in a year, Fatima and other ladies of her tribal sport a nomadic lifestyle. While during summer, the journey is upward from the foothills of the Himalayan ranges of Jammu and Kashmir to the higher reaches, it is downward during the winter season.

In winters, with the beginning of spring, these Gujjars and Bakerwals shift from Poonch-Rajouri and Kupwara, Baramulla and Anantnag areas and enter the Margs – the lush Green high pastures and Dhokes in upper reaches of Pir Panjal ranges. Most of them reach Lolab, Gurez and Sona Marg on the eastern top hills of Kashmir.

"We keep horses for riding and transportation, sheep and goats for production of wool, milk and meat and sell surplus animals and their subsidiary products and buy maize, rice and grocery from the villages for day-to-day consumption," informs Fatima

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adding they travel on compact basis with their baggage, flocks of sheep, herd of goats, fleet of horses and dogs.

Quite comfortable with her routine, Fatima never complains about her life even once and adds that this is how she has lived all along. But what about their education?

"No, I haven't studied. In fact, nobody, none of the girls and women among us is educated," she says plainly. Fatima is one among such thousands of Gujjar-Bakerwal girls who have never been to school. They, for that matter, do not know what school is like as they are always on the move.

The woes of this apparently smiling Gujjar woman is more than that of women belonging to other twelve different tribes of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite the schemes initiated by Central and State Governments for the upliftment and welfare of the women folk, these Gujjar women are still a suffering lot.

"Nomad Gujjar women are undergoing through massive exploitation and have been victims of suppression and victimization. On one hand, they became the victim of superstitions while on the other, despite excessive work hard, they do not get due respect and position in the tribal society. Because of early age marriage and social bindings, only 18 per cent of the Gujjar girls are in a position to get admission in Primary school level. The circumstances compel them to leave their studies even at the different levels," informs Mr. Javaid Rahi, Secretary, Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation, J&K.

According to a survey conducted by Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation, J&K, over 100 girls students belonging to various tribes of the Ladakh region are presently doing various Post Graduate studies in University of Jammu while in spite of 5% reservation quota, only girl student of Gujjar Tribe is doing her Master's Degree in English Department University of Jammu and another Gujjar Girl has being admitted this year to L.L.B course. The situation is worst in Kashmir University

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where despite 5% reservation for Gujjars, no Gujjar girl student is enrolled for Post Graduation till date.

"Out of the 12 lakh Gujjar population, only 5 girls from Gujjar tribe are doing Master degree in Faculty of Arts in Jammu University while in Kashmir University, not even single Gujjar girl is enrolled despite 5 % reservation to them," says Rahi.

The Centre-sponsored schemes like Balika Simridhi Yojna or and Indira Mahila Yojna haven't helped Gujjar women at all resulting in more backwardness among them. Rahi says the status of Gujjar women is worst then the women belonging to Beda, Bot, Balti, Garra, Mon, Brokpa, Purigipa, Gaddi and Sippis Tribes of the State.

Examples are galore in the history that Gujjar women have shown no less courage and bravey than any other women belonging to urban elite. Zooni, an old Gujjar lady had organized a women force in her village in Jammu and Kashmir to fight against the barbarous Pakistani invaders in 1947. With rifle in one hand and a thick stick in another hand to control her cattle in the jungles, she used to fire at the invaders.

Mali Bi was another old Gujjar woman who displayed exemplary courage, faithfulness and loyalty by working shoulder to shoulder with the Indian Armed Forces in Rajouri-Poonch sector in the 1971 war with Pakistan. She was conferred Padam Shree in recognition of her services.

If the women of this tribe have significantly contributed towards nation, then why nothing is being done for her education, her upliftment and betterment, asks Mr. Shamsheer Hakla Poonchi, a Gujjar leader of Bandichechian, Poonch. Being illiterate, poor and nomadic, Gujjars and Bakerwals have been ignored by successive governments both at the Centre and the state and there is not a single voice of Gujjar women audible anywhere in the state, he rues. Due to militancy, in Gujjar tribal society which was already lagging behind the rest of the tribes

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of the troubled region suffered much. The girls who were going to schools were forced to sit at homes.

For this nomadic community, the government had opened at least 300 mobile schools. But due to militancy, over 150 schools have been closed down or made stationary schools as the teachers refused to go to the higher reaches in these mobile schools for the scare of the militants. These mobile schools for educating Gujjars have failed in bringing a change in the educational scenario.

"Mobile primary schools for the nomadic population were a wonderful idea. Initially, it did help the community students a great deal. But all these schools were single teacher schools," informs a state education department official on conditions on anonymity adding as militancy started and militants started frequenting the upper areas, these mobile school teachers refused to move with the schools. It is no wonder to see most of the schools closed and those which are still running have no teachers. A number of Gujjar and Bakerwal student hostels, particularly in Anantnag, Pulwama, Kupwara and Doda areas were under the occupation of the Security Forces since 1991 till recently.

Though the government has started Gujjar and Bakerwals hostels at the District level with free boarding and lodging facilities up to 12th class and reservation in employment and vocational institutions, they are still backward educationally as all such efforts are half hearted.

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6

Ladakhi Women

In the shadow of the gun

It seemed to be just another day. A bright Sun had risen over the beautiful, barren hills of Kargil town, situated on the banks of the gushing Suru River. There wasn't anything unusual about it but as the hours passed by Amina Bano and her husband Bashir Hussain of Gond Colony of the town couldn't control their happiness. After all, their only son, six-year-old Ghulam Hussain, had just come home rushing with the news that he had secured 98 per cent marks in his Upper Kinder Garden and was promoted to the next class. As the winter had set in this part of the world, it was the last working day of Jaffaria Public School, Kargil, which was closing for the next three months.

After gobbling his lunch, an excited young Ghulam went out in the neighbourhood with his friends Tufail Ahmed, Mohammed Salim (who was his class-fellow too), Nadim Hussain and Mushtaq Ali to play cricket. As the clock stuck four, the Pakistani army shells started pounding the entire Kargil town with a ferocious intensity, hitting innocent people, shops, schools and hospitals.

Both Amina and her husband called out to the kids, asking them to return immediately. And they did listen. Salim took Ghulam by the hand and started moving towards the house but Ghulam managed to free himself and rushed towards the

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ground to pick up his shoes which he had left behind. He had picked them up but while returning a shell hit him, causing his instant death. His friend Mohd Salim, who was hit on his back and legs, also succumbed to his injuries in the hospital. Pakistani shelling in Gond Colony in the heart of Kargil town that bright November day killed these two innocent children, aged six and ten. Three more children playing cricket in the same field were critically injured.

Amina Bano and Bashir were shell-shocked. Ghulam was their only son. Their two daughters were very young - aged two years and six months. Tears didn't stop flowing from the eyes of Amina who recently got her tubectomy done. Since past one month, things seem to have been better for the hundreds of Kargil residents, although there's no wishing away the fragile nature of the peace that prevails now. There is no knowing where a shell would drop next. In fact, this sparsely populated high-altitude town is, potentially, one of the most dangerous places to live in the world.

The residents live in fear. Most of them have developed insomnia — the constant fear of getting hit by a shell is always on their minds. Aijaz Hussain, who works in the J&K PWD department, has suffered much due to shelling. His son Tufail, who was playing with Ghulam on the field on that fateful day, was also hit by the shell. He had to be admitted to the Kargil district hospital for 17 days and still goes to the hospital for dressing and injections.

"I wasn't well, so had remained indoors the entire day," Aijaz reminisces. "But when the shells started pounding our area, I told my brother to get the kids inside. As he was about to get up, a splinter broke the windowpane and it fell on us. At the same time, we heard Tufail shouting — 'Daddy, Daddy, *Mujhe Lagi Hai* (Dad, I am hit).' We rushed outside and saw his arm bleeding."

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Like Aijaz, Imdad Hussein, working in Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, is also suffering every moment. His only son, Shujaat Ali, five, also hit by the shell in the same ground, has a splinter in his head which is touching his brain. This has paralysed the right side of the young boy's body.

"I had gone to the main market when I got to know that Shujaat, who was playing with kids, was hit by a Pakistani shell. His mother Fiza Bano who went to save her, was also hit by the splinter at her neck," said Imdad Hussein, adding that Shujaat needs to be taken to Srinagar for the treatment of the splinter which is still inside his head. "My young boy was vomiting for three days after he was hit in the head by the shell. This is a brain injury," he adds.

Though 90 per cent of the adults in Kargil know when to run for cover and how to protect themselves, the kids are the worst victims of shelling in Kargil and Dras. With shelling becoming a routine feature in these areas, the Army and the district administration have been trying to inform people as to how they should protect themselves during shelling. "We tell these kids to just lie down when they hear the bang. We have been telling them that the shell goes up in the air to a height of 3 feet, so don't run, just lie down or hide somewhere. We are facing a problem as far as these small kids are concerned."

In Dras, people are suffering too. Rukhsana Jabeen, a student of Class IX at Himbass Public School, Bhimbet, lost her elder sister Khalida Zabeen and her nephew, the two-year-old Mudassir, when a shell hit them in their house. Her brother-in-law Bilal Ahmed, a teacher, informs that though his wife died on the spot, his kid was still alive after being hit by the shell but died half an hour later. Similar is the story of Abdul Shakoor Mir, an inspector in J&K Consumer Affairs Department who lost his 19-year-old daughter Yasmeen

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Shakoor to shelling.

In fact, in Dras block, 26 civilians died because of Pakistani shelling. And what pains their folks and neighbours is that there is no healing touch coming their way. Pakistan does not stop pounding them and the state government does not give them any compensation. "If somebody dies because of militancy, his family is given jobs under SRO-43 but there is nothing for us," says Bilal Ahmed.

Kargil and Dras residents believe that Pakistan has been targeting them as they haven't succumbed to its pressure. Pakistan desperately tried to spread militancy in this peaceful region and having failed to do so, has been killing innocent people. Although Pakistani guns are also targeting a number of villages on the border, Kargil is the only headquarter under attack.

Though the cease-fire all along the Line of Control has brought some respite into their lives, the people of Kargil district who faced the brunt of the Kargil war are still suspicious about the cease-fire by the enemy. People living in Kargil town, situated just a few kilometres from the Line of Control, aren't ready to believe what Pakistan says.

As harsh winter has already set in here and the temperature has dipped to -15 degree Celsius in Kargil and -25 degree Celsius in Dras, the people are still skeptical. Before cease-fire, the guns were roaring almost every day and the shelling had become a routine feature, affecting their lives badly.

"We cannot trust Pakistan. We do not know about this cease-fire. We only know that since 1997, Pakistan has made our lives hell and we are living under acute stress," says Haji Badiulzam, ex-manager, J&K Industries Department, adding that Pakistani shells have been hitting Kargil town and its surrounding areas regularly.

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But there are still some signs of hope, now that there has been a strong desire for the return of peace and end of hostilities between the two neighbouring countries of India and Pakistan. "We are still hopeful about the peace initiatives and with this cease-fire on the Line of Control, we pray for the permanent return of peace and normalcy to the trouble-torn state," says Asgar Karbalai, vice-chairman, Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IMKT), a powerful religious organization of Shia Muslims which dominates Kargil district.

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Tools of Change

Till few years ago, death loomed large over Kargil in the form of Pakistani shells. On any normal day, every afternoon these shells would chase its residents into underground bunkers. As soon as the Kargilis would hear the big bangs, they'd rush for safety – some in the bunkers, some in the safe locations and others would simply flee the town. Pakistani army shells would pound the entire Kargil region with a ferocious intensity. No one would know where the shells would fall as death loomed large everywhere.

Thankfully, things are better now. The ceasefire which came into place on the borders of Jammu and Kashmir in November 2003 has brought about positive changes in the lives of the people of the border region of Kargil. After having faced a war and displacement from their houses, things seem to be better for thousands of Kargil residents.

As the peaceful Shia population dominating this extremely conservative land-locked district is now reaping the benefits of the ceasefire, they don't forget to pray for the longevity of this "fragile peace". Joining them in this prayer for permanent peace on the borders of Kargil, are hundreds of Kargili women and girls who, after tasting peace, want it to become permanent.

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Situated at an altitude of 2,704 m, 204-km from Srinagar in the west and 234-km from Leh in the east, this Shia-dominated conservative district situated close to the Line of Control in Ladakh suffered much devastation during the 1999-Kargil conflict. But since Kargil war, a number of developments are taking place in Kargil region. The IT revolution is knocking at Kargil doors, computer centres are being opened and army is expanding its network of Army Goodwill Schools (AGS) to the entire district. But the most prominent and positive change visible in this orthodox region is its conservative Shia girls and women coming out in big numbers for economic empowerment.

Razia Bano, a young Shia girl from Wakha village has also not remained untouched from this change.

As a bright Sun rises over the beautiful, barren hills of Kargil town situated on the banks of gushing Suru river, with her a scarf properly draped over her head Razia treads towards Women Empowerment Centre situated in the heart of Kargil town. So does dozens of other Shia Muslim girls.

A class 12th pass out, Razia Bano could not go to college for her higher studies. The conservative set up in Kargil does not encourage girls to come out of their houses, even for higher education. After sitting at home for a couple of years, this once brilliant student however persuaded her parents to seek admission in Women Empowerment Centre (WEC) which was opened in Kargil town few years ago under Operation Sadhbhavana (Goodwill) by the army.

Successfully, she enrolled herself for one year diploma in DTP from the Kargil WEC which has also six internet connections. What would seems like a dream in such far flung and land locked region to Razia Bano, Zakiya Bano (who travels 21 kms everyday from Kumbathang to Kargil to attend computer classes) and many other girls who come to the empowerment

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centre, has became a reality today. Dozens of other girls from Kargil region are undergoing training in many other courses at the WEC.

Since past eleven years when the Kargil conflict broke out, the 14 Corps of Indian army which was set up in post-Kargil era, undertook massive developmental works in entire Ladakh region. In the area where the temperature touches sub-zero (Up to - 60 degree C) and the state administration is literally defunct, the army has been doing a lot for the people of Ladakh. To win the hearts and minds of the people under Operation Sadhbhavana, a number of initiatives such as Women Empowerment Centres have been taken which have started yielding good results.

"Kargil is a very conservative society. When we opened up WEC and such welfare centres for them, there was very less response as Kargil residents looked at us with suspicion," informs an army officer posted in Kargil adding the Shia Muslims also do not encourage their daughters to move out of the houses-either for jobs or studies. Though women work hard at home and in the fields, but it does not get them any money.

The WECs, on the other hand, not only empower women of remote Kargil areas by training them in knitting, weaving, tailoring, embroidery, carpet weaving etc. and making them self reliant but the women undergoing training at the Centre also get paid while being trained. Such activities are in fact a step towards providing opportunity to the women of this area to generate additional income for their families and take part in decision making at village level.

For the six months' period of winter, when the Zojila Pass, the gateway to the frontier region of Ladakh, gets blocked due to heavy snowfall, the women empowerment centres and adult literacy centres help the local women a lot. Here they not only learn vocational skills but also can sell their products like shawls,

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sweaters, Bal Kalavas etc.

Women can weave a small carpet or do embroidery over a shawl which can fetch them anything from Rs 150 to Rs 1000. Besides, the WEC products like mufflers, gloves, monkey caps, woolen socks etc. are purchased by the families of the soldiers and officers. Even these are put on sale in the Cooperative melas organized by Army Wives Welfare Association.

"For us, this is a big achievement that now we have over 20 girls in the WEC. We have trained over 300 women at this centre which was established more than ten years ago," informs Mohammad Hassan, the tailoring and knitting instructor at the WEC adding though few conservative Shia people are resisting to these positive changes taking place in this forbidden land, yet the younger generation is quite excited about the developmental projects. More and more women of Kargil have now tasted some degree economic independence.

Women of this Shia Muslim-dominated area are trying to break the shackles. Scores of conservative Shia girls are now slowly and gradually coming out to get themselves trained in vocational training centres as part of the development coming through various state government schemes and Army's Operation Sadhbhavana. Many pass outs from here have actually turned entrepreneurs and gained employment. Through Women Empowerment Centres (WEC), they are trying to make a living for themselves and educate their children.

"Many girls started their own boutiques after being trained in tailoring or even started stitching clothes of the people while many others got jobs in the state and central schemes launched for the rural and border people of the state," informs Colonel G.P. Kamat, who is looking after Sadhbhavana project at the 14 Corps, Leh.

"Our main aim is to make the women of Ladakh especially

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Kargil self-reliant, independent and economically empowered so that they can contribute to the development of the local economy," he adds asserting that they have a deep commitment in carrying out this role through various projects undertaken by the troops deployed in this region.

Kargilis have started realizing now that if a society, especially in remote areas, is to develop, both men and women have to contribute their bit. The women empowerment centres provide technical and vocational skills to womenfolk so that they can supplement the income of their families and thus contribute to their social and economic development.

In this cold desert where survival is the main question for the people who face so many difficulties, the Army also feels that border management is a sum game of human security which includes Human Development and Border Security. While Border Security is being looked after by the troops up-front, human security is being addressed with such initiatives.

A visit to Kargil which is divided into seven blocks namely Kargil, Drass, Sankoo, Taisuru, Shargole, Shakar-Chiktan and Zanskar and one sees for herself human development. In Dras, the second coldest inhabited place on the earth after Siberia where the minimum temperature recorded is -60 degree Celsius, the WEC Dras named as Zaito Empowerment Centre caters to the women of the area who want to stand on their own.

Here too girls from neighbouring areas like Muradbagh, Holial, Goshan etc. come to learn vocational courses. Fatima Bano learnt stitching and knitting here only and after completing her course successfully, got the job of supervisor/instructor here. Now she is a model for scores of other village girls who come to learn various courses from here. Fatima believes that the Women Empowerment Centres at Kargil and Dras have helped in widening the vision of women besides enhancing their self

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confidence. Her aim too, is to impart vocational training for upgradation of skill among women in various fields with the overall aim of making them better educated and more empowered.

In this militancy-free district of Ladakh which also remained in news due to clashes between the Buddhist and Muslim communities, coming out of their houses, entering adult literacy centres (ALCs) and acquiring vocational skills to earn a living is something which these women could never dream of. Perhaps, the army rightly believed that women should be the main tools of change in the region and thus also for conflict prevention. Hence the WECs and the ALCs.

For those Kargili women who couldn't still come out of their houses to attend the welfare centres regularly owing to family circumstances but wanted to do start some work so as to earn a living or supplement their husbands' meagre earnings, army had some other plans. It invited a team of eight experts from Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organization (HESCO) Dehradun to Kargil which conducted a course here to train 46 women from all over the region in the preparation and preservation of items like agarbatti/ dhoop, jam, squash, pickles, baking of biscuits and so on using local resources.

After getting trained, these women have started working from their homes only. Besides, new vocations like candle making, basket weaving, biscuit baking, food processing, block printing etc are also being added to the WECs here.

How the winds of change are sweeping across the conservative Kargil can well be gauged from the fact that more stress is now being given on the education of girls in Kargil.

Since the institution of the Kargil Autonomous Hill Development Council, special emphasis is being laid to promote girl enrolment in the district. As education can bring about

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desired changes, many schools have been opened in Kargil and girls are being encouraged to study. Kargil Hill Council was constituted during the year 2003.Out of 30 Councilors, three were women. More women are now inspired and are planning to taste a plunge in politics.

"As more and more Kargili women are opening up to the changes around them, they would like their children to get educated in good schools like the Goodwill schools which would surely be better than the government schools," says Dr. Suba Chandran, Director, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, a well known think-tank of security related issues.

"And if such efforts like women empowerment centres are running successfully, such initiatives can be a sound strategy for conflict prevention resulting in ensuring peace in Ladakh," adds Dr. Chandran asserting that this can pave way for "war prevention" and not "winning wars".

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Transforming Turtuk

Till Eleven years ago, hardly many people knew about Turtuk, a small sleepy remote region nestled in the mighty Ladakh mountain ranges across Khardung La - the world's highest motorable pass. But suddenly its name got splashed all over the newspapers and television channels following the arrest of over 24 youth during the Kargil war for their terrorist links. These 24 youth had crossed to Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and acquired arms training but were arrested after their return. A huge cache of arms and ammunition was also seized from them in the higher altitude of this area. Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI had long been trying to woo such gullible Turtuk youth who had no job opportunities or other avenues.

Seemingly, after trying to open a front in Kargil, Pakistan was trying to open up another front in Turtuk which has great

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strategic significance. (The Southern Glacier of Siachen has its entrance from here only and Siachen Brigade at Partappur is just 90 km away.)

After all, till few years ago, Turtuk, a part of Baltistan, was Pakistani territory and Pakistan wanted to recapture it. The humiliating defeat of 1971 in the same sub-sector was too difficult to forget for them. As the area was full of anti-India sentiment, Pakistan wanted to take advantage of it during Op Vijay. But the timely action by the Army didn't allow their nefarious designs to succeed.

Eleven years hence, Turtuk is no longer the same. The area which, in general, includes seven villages of Turtuk, Tyakshi, Gharari, Thang, Chulunka, Bogdang and Changmar, is witnessing unbelievable changes. No longer is this a neglected, underdeveloped area. Locals are working shoulder to shoulder with army and the development in the area is to be seen to believe. The entire region has undergone a sea-change in these past years.

Since 1999, much water has since flowed down the Shyok river which flows across the beautiful valley. If Turtuk is changing for better, its women also haven't remained untouched by this development in the region.

As development has come to their doorsteps, the women of Muslim-dominated Turtuk are trying to break the shackles too. If Ayesha Sudhika was the first MBBS doctor here, both among men and women from this remote region, Sultan Bee was another such women of the area who did a lot for the people of Turtuk especially its women folk. Now a Women Empowerment Centre (WEC) which has been named after Sultan Bee by the Army is doing the same job as part of the civic action project, that is, to win hearts and minds of local populace. It not only empowers the women of this remote area by training them in knitting, weaving, tailoring, embroidery

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and carpet weaving and makes them self reliant but it also brings lot of confidence in them too. Carpet weaving factory as part of WEC has also been started in the village.

In the past few years, Amina Bano, the instructor at the WEC has taught many girls to make candles in the Centre. Besides, many others have learnt knitting and tailoring too. She herself gets Rs 3500 as salary from the army as the instructor. Life is changing for better for the girls of Turtuk.

"The activities at WEC are a step towards providing opportunity for women of this area to generate additional income for their families and take part in decision making at village level," says Major Amit Sharma whose unit is responsible for the area.

If development can be gauged from the education being imparted in the region, then the area does not lag behind. Till class 12th, co-education schools are running here. Turtuk has a higher secondary school and the neighbouring Bogdang has another one while in the same village, army is also running an Army Goodwill School (AGS) Bogdang. Many girls from Turtuk, after passing their class 12 exams, are now going to colleges in Leh and Srinagar cities.

Earlier, there wasn't any school in the area. One had to go to the nearest school at Diskit which is two and a half hours away. Another army school at Tyakshi situated right on the banks of Shyok river, besides providing quality education based on CBSE curriculum, imparts training in extensive use of computers with customized software. Unbelievable, but yes, the school has internet facility also.

"We believe that education can bring about desired changes and that is what we are doing – imparting education to the people of this far flung area situated right on the LoC so that they can understand the things in the right perspective," says Major Amit Sharma. The school which has recently been recognized by the J&K government, encourages co-curricular

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activities like painting, quiz competition, recitation, music, and sports, he informs.

"Since past few years, undoubtedly our region is witnessing much progress especially its women folk," says Ghulam Mehdi, Turtuk's lone boy who is pursuing his doctorate on Sociology from the University of Jammu.

Unlike Kargil's Muslim Shia highly conservative society, the unorthodox Muslim society in Turtuk which is dominated by the Noor Bakshi tribe, sees women as equals. Women, informs Mehdi, are basically the bread earners in Turtuk. They are the ones who work in the fields, at home, do cultivation etc. In compared to men, women are more hard working.

Though education among girls was not prevalent in the society before, basically because of the reason that the area is quite far off (over 230 kms from Leh) and had very less contact with the outer world, but the winds of change are sweeping across this region also and some NGOs like Skarchan which are running successful programmes in Turtuk, are now providing adult education to the women.

"Though education is still less but army has played a major role in the area in spreading education in the past few years. Army's contribution in women's education and empowerment is very significant," says Mehdi adding that NGOs like Skarchan are also contributed a lot in Turtuk.

Since 1999, numbers of developments have taken place in the Turtuk. The IT revolution is knocking at Turtuk doors and a state-of-the art- hospital, a school and a vocational training centre are all part of the development coming through the Army's Operation Sadhbhavana.

Besides opening new vistas for the people of the area, many have also got employment here in the school. Another source of income and employment for the villagers is Qurban Ali

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Cooperative poultry Society in Tyakshi to increase the scope of employment and boost up the economy of the area. The locals are trained at this society in production/care of chicks at village level, planting of trees and production of vegetables by trench and Green House farming on large scale to make them self sufficient and self reliant.

"Our community is still economically backward and subsistence in nature, neither agriculture nor the livestock economy is sufficient to have a decent standard of living. People, therefore, have to work as daily wagers and this avenue has been created by the Indian Army. Being close to Pakistan border, the army employs them as porters which fetches them good money," says Mehdi adding the villagers keep donkeys and mules also which are also hired by the army to supply material to the forward posts.

Acknowledging the fact that the pace of development has been much faster in these past years in comparison with the change across the Line of Control, these patriots of Shyok Valley are too happy to work with army. Many of the youth have taken up jobs as porters for carrying the load to the army posts. A number of them have found themselves jobs in Op Sadhbhavana projects and the process is on. Both the army and Turtuk residents are happy about these changes.

"Adult literacy has picked up much in Ladakh especially among the women folk of the region who are more laborious than their male counterparts," says Ghulam Mehdi who is pursing PhD on "Tribes in Transition: A study of Habitat, Economy and Society among the Baltis of Ladakh",

What is quite surprising is the fact that women are entering politics too. Rozi Bi, wife of a police officer from Bogdang, recently contested civic elections in Turtuk. All this has been made possible because of the positive changes in the area brought about by developmental projects by the army and

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NGOs.

What's more? Till recently, Turtuk women did not know anything about micro-saving schemes. But now not only they are saving their money, but are also maintaining their own accounts, thanks to Skarchan which has also been holding various awareness camps and interactions among the women of Turtuk with the women of Nubra block thus exposing them to the rest of the world. Educational programmes, AIDS awareness programmes and adult education etc are few hallmarks of the organization.

The army in Turtuk which is vigorously following this "Goodwill" believes that the whole focus is to win the hearts and minds of the people, thereby forestalling militancy, which has obvious ramifications in conflict prevention.

"Human development if not engendered will be endangered", thus there is thrust on women empowerment through employment generation, education and confidence building. Today, Turtuk, undoubtedly, is the best example of border management by the army. Peace has been restored in the area and people are so happy about the changes that have taken place in their lives.

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7

Women and Security Forces

7.1 Woman combatants

Couriers of death

Few days ago in an anti-militancy operation in village Bagla in Bharat area of Doda district in Jammu province, the security forces killed two Laskhar-e-Toiba terrorists. While the killing of two LeT terrorists was a routine affair in terms of an anti-militancy operation, the killing of a female militant Zahida Bano, 22, with these two ultras however came as a surprise to security agencies working in the counter-insurgency environs in Jammu and Kashmir.

Zahida Bano Malik, daughter of Abdul Samad Malik, a resident of Bagla, the third female militant to be killed in violence-hit Jammu and Kashmir and second one in Doda district in about two decade long militancy in the State, was in fact a "woman operative-cum-paramour" of the Lashkar terrorists. Actively involved in militancy as an over-ground worker of the Lashkar-e-Toiba terror outfit in the region, she represented hundreds of such women of Jammu and Kashmir who have overtly or covertly supported militancy in the region.

Prior to her, Samreena Bano, a dental technician and active Lashkar militant, was shot dead by police and security forces along with a top Lashkar commander Abu Yasir in Bhaderwah

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area of Doda district on May 29, 2008. Before this, a Jaish-e-Mohammed bomber woman Yasmeena, 22, was killed in Pulwama in South Kashmir in November 2005 when an IED, she was allegedly going to plant on the road, exploded in her hands.

In the past two decades of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, there have been a number of instances in which women have been arrested by police and security forces for transporting arms and explosives, Hawala money and providing information to the militants about movement of security forces.

During the initial phase of militancy (1989-94) when there was a mass uprising, women would lead the protest demonstrations against the government and were often seen leading the mass agitations. But in the past 20 years of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, the women never picked up gun actively like men.

"Women would take advantage of their flowing burqas and would even act as couriers or messengers putting their own lives to great risk. They also allowed themselves to be used by the separatists' propaganda machinery. Even they agreed to send their husbands, brothers, sons etc for arms training and thus participate in the Jihad," informed Mr. Shiv Darshan Singh Jamwal, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Police, J&K, who himself has a great experience in fighting terrorism in the state.

Kashmiri women also provided food and shelter to the "Mujahideen" when they launched their "armed struggle" against the Indian security forces. Women would sing 'wanwun'-traditional songs welcoming gun-wielding militants and even showered flowers and candies on them. Militancy was so much glorified in 1990 that girls were drawn towards young chaps carrying guns. Girls married terrorists in Kashmir but did not become their active partners in fighting the Indian forces in Kashmir.

"Women have always helped the terrorists but they never

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picked up gun or fought like militants," said Mr. Dilbagh Singh, Inspector General of Police (IGP), Jammu province adding it was always easy for the women to help the terrorists hiding in the jungles on the pretext of getting firewood from the forests or grazing cattle and thus taking food or other things to them. Money, he believes, basically was the prime mover.

Women in Kashmir never picked up gun for the cause of "Freedom" as was done by the female cadres of LTTE in Sri Lanka. Even Kashmir's only all-women radical outfit Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of Faith) also always remained a soft organization. Though its cadres, the burqa-clad women, worked as over ground workers, but actively fighting as terrorists was never seen.

But since past few years, reports started pouring in that Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed outfits had recruited women cadres and giving them proper training in the terrorist training camps in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir.

A Pakistani woman, Asiya Bibi, 23, wife of a Pakistani soldier Mohammed Sajjad, arrested from Rajouri in November 2008, told her interrogators that ISI was training about 100 women for terrorism related activities. She informed that the women fidayeen were undergoing arms training in various terror camps at Bimbar, Kotli and Sena in PoK adding the ISI was initially planning to push 17 girls into India to mix with the local population. As per the plan, they were to marry locals and finally act as spies.

In yet another report sent to Ministry of Home Affairs in February 2009, even Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) said that the LeT planned to repeat Mumbai-like bomb blasts in major Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Jaipur and Bangalore. For the purpose, it was training 22 highly trained woman terrorists between 18-23 years. These women terrorists, mostly from very poor backgrounds and the majority

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of them were orphans, were trained at a terror camp nicknamed *"Jangal-Mangal"* located near Kotli, in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the RAW report said.

Another media report suggested that Lashkar-e-Toiba was training women terrorists in a full-fledged training camp situated six km from Muridke on GT Road between Lahore and Rawalpindi, with infrastructure to provide rigorous training to cadres in guerrilla warfare. The report even said that this women-training camp is headed by a 45-year-old woman jihadi, Umi Hamad, a Pakistani national.

But nobody took such reports seriously until the then Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor made a statement that women terrorists were being given training on the other side of the Line-of-Control in Kashmir to infiltrate into India for destabilizing the country during the general elections 2009. He even expressed apprehensions that these women were being trained on the other side to infiltrate into Jammu and Kashmir and it was quite possible that women may be involved in giving directions to the terrorists. It sent the security forces in a tizzy.

The increased involvement of Kashmiri women in militancy and the revelations that ISI is training women cadres of Laskhar-e-Toiba and other militant groups to infiltrate them into Jammu and Kashmir and use as pawns against security forces is quite disturbing. As women are less likely to be searched at checkpoints, this trend is likely to become a major issue – political and religious.

"Being a part of the militant movement, women were increasingly taking participation in over ground activities, supporting the separatists and indirectly the militant movement but now with women terrorists infiltrating, there are chances of these militants being used as honey traps to infiltrate the ranks of paramilitary forces deployed in Kashmir," said a political analyst adding that women have been leveling

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allegations like rapes, molestations etc against security forces and thus raking up those issues which bring down the morale of the forces. Such things are played up by anti-Indian forces and separatists who themselves need some space in the atmosphere which seemed to be turned against them.

With the increase in challenge from the women terrorists, Indian security establishment needs to bring in more and more women forces, be it CRPF or state police, to deal with the threat of women terrorists and for frisking women of the state. But that again would be quite a burden on the exchequer.

Women Over Ground Workers (OGWs): There have been a number of arrests of women cadres and OGWs in the past few years belonging to Lashkar-e-Toiba and Hizbul Mujahideen and other terror outfits.

- Haseena Begum was arrested at Ramban in June 2007 for being part of a Lashkar module planning to assassinate Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad during a public rally in the district. Begum, along with a fidayeen squad of the Lashkar had managed to reach closer to where the Chief Minister was to make his speech.
- Masooda Khatoon, a government teacher and a resident of Mendhar, Poonch was arrested by police from Janipura in 2007 for giving shelter to Jaish-e-Mohammed 'divisional commander' Saifullah Qari in her house at Janipura. Qari, the mastermind of Ayodhya attack, was eliminated by Special Operations Group, Jammu and Delhi Police in a joint operation.
- Two women Rafiqa Begum and Rubeena Begum were arrested in March 2008 after intercepting an ammunition-laden vehicle on its way from Doda to Qazigund in the Valley. The duo told their interrogators that they were assisting the terrorists for money and confessed to having delivered Rs 2 lakh hawala money to LeT commanders

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Abu Yasir and Mohammed Iqbal in Doda.

- Nahida Altaf, a Law College student in Jammu and a resident of Surankote in Poonch district, was arrested by police at Akhnoor in 2006 when she was smuggling a consignment of explosive material from Surankote to Jammu in Maruti car of her father, a head constable in Police Department.
- Quresha Bi and Muneeza Bi were arrested in January 2010 in Mendhar on the charges of actively helping the LeT militants who had taken shelter in Mendhar forests for past few months.
- Fareeda Begum who had allegedly married Jaish commander Saifullah Qari and her mother Zubaida Begum, residents of Mendhar, were also arrested by police for helping the top brass of Jaish-e-Mohammad outfit in Poonch district.

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In the forefront

In the blistering heat of a sultry afternoon, while most of the girls of her age are welcoming the arrival of spring in Kashmir and enjoying the weather change with the onset of summers in the mustard fields and fully-bloomed almond and walnut trees, Wazira Jan, 23, is sweating it out in the tough training grounds of Sher-e-Kashmir Police Training Academy, Udhampur, situated some 200 kms away from her native village of Shopian in South Kashmir. Dressed in black fatigues, shoes and a maroon cap which lends her a personality of a commando, while she aims at the bulley in the shooting ground in the scorching sunlight, the harsh training makes this profusely sweating girl, take a small break of a second or two from her training to gulp some fresh air.

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Unlike average Kashmiri Muslim girls who normally remain confined to the surroundings of their homes and help their families with the traditional chores, Wazira has dared to choose a path which is laden with great risks, challenges and sacrifices for the sake of her Motherland. Undergoing training as a commando in Jammu and Kashmir Police to fight terrorism in the militancy-infested state, Wazira is among 15 other girls belonging to various parts of the troubled mountainous state who are undergoing ATC (Anti-Terrorist Course) to combat militancy in the state at Training Academy. Sher-e-Kashmir Police Training Academy is the only police academy in the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir which is imparting anti-terrorist training to the women police officers, inspectors, sub-inspectors and constables.

Hailing from Shopian in Pulwama district of Anantnag-the same district where 24 Kashmiri Pandits were massacred by the terrorists, Wazira joined police force despite all odds and is all set to fight terrorists when she would again be in the field after completing her six week course.

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir where women have been the worst victims of militancy since past 20 years of turmoil, women, at the same time have been in the forefront in fighting terrorism at all levels. Though presence of women is strongly felt in the over 60,000 strong police force in troubled J&K, they have now started actively participating in anti-militancy operations in the state with their male counterparts.

Interestingly, many girls who are undergoing this anti-terrorist course at the Academy are Muslim girls hailing from valley; others have come from highly militancy-infested districts of the state including Kupwara, Baramulla, Doda, Poonch, Rajouri etc. Ladakh region is also represented in this course as young Tashi, 22, has come all her way from Leh to participate in the course and to fight terrorists.

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Roshana Bano, who hails from a tiny hamlet of Hatpora in Ganderbal tehsil of Kashmir which was once a den of militancy, is a daring police-woman who had to face stiff opposition three years ago when she decided to join state police. Living under the constant fear of death, her family comprising of mother, father and two brothers could never think that she would join the ranks of state police – a thing one could not even imagine in Kashmir for girls. This would have posed a serious threat to them as the various militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir, not only want that women folk should stay at home but they had even ordered the women cops to quit their jobs few months back. But as determined as she was, she faced the odds and did join the state police. Roshana was posted in various militancy-infested areas of the state before coming to Udhampur to take specialized commando training to fight militants.

But not so lucky was Wazira whose brother was already in state police but quit his own job in protest against her decision to join the force five years ago.

"Everybody opposed me when I wanted to join police. My elder brother who was already in the police quit the job in protest against my joining the police but I was determined," says Wazira adding that the prevailing circumstances in Kashmir forced her family to oppose her. Her friend and course-mate Shehnaz of neighboring Wesu village in Kulgam tehsil, Anantnag however had family support as her father was already in police. She served in Kashmir after joining the force in 1997.

Many of the girls who are undergoing ATC training and hail from highly militancy infested districts of the state, have been victims of militancy as their relatives, cousins, fathers and other relations have fallen prey to terrorists' bullets. But it has, in no way, deterred them from taking up the gun against the terrorists.

One of them is Madhu Bala from hilly Udhampur whose father

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was a police officer. Life hasn't been good to her family as militancy has affected their lives. Madhu who wants to root out militancy from the entire state has seen her father felling a victim to militancy. Way back in 1992 when militancy was at its peak, her father Mr. Dewan Singh, a Station House Office (SHO) who was posted in Qazigund area of South Kashmir was killed by the militants when they exploded a powerful Improvised Explosive Device planted beneath his jeep in which he was travelling to Qazigund also with his driver and four other people. Such was the intensity of the blast that none of them nobody survived.

Eldest of all, she has three younger sisters, the youngest is studying in class 5th. Posted in second battalion of IRP, Madhu says that she wants to eliminate every terrorist and the specialized training that she is getting in the Academy, would help her in that. She wants to fight terrorists and her morale is quite high and that is what she says "would be a real tribute to my father".

Not only these women are taking specialized training to fight terrorists, but in their personal and professional lives also, they have inspired almost an entire generation of young Kashmiri girls to not to pay heed to the threats by various groups. Shehnaz recalls that when Burqa threat was at its peak in entire Kashmir valley and the scared girls were forced to wear veil by a lesser known outfit Lashkar-e-Jabbar, she had motivated many of them not to be afraid and believe in themselves. Even when the terrorists exploded a grenade in a Girls Higher Secondary School in Yorkushpora near Qazigund to scare the girls and thus force them to wear burqa, she remained undeterred by all such threats. The threat later died down also.

At present, the Academy is conducting two courses for the women cops who include ATC (Anti-Terrorist Course) and UAC (Un-Armed Combat). The UAC course duration is nine weeks and the course runs continuously throughout the year.

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Women cops who have already put in a service of at least two years to their credit, have been selected from all the 14 troubled districts of the state for these courses. Fifteen girls are undergoing six weeks anti-terrorist training in the Academy while 22 women cops are being trained for UAC, informs Dr Ashok Bhan, Director General of Police, J&K.

None of these women lack in anyway than their male counterparts in any aspect of the training. Infact, all of these girls have already undergone a basic training when they joined the police force few years ago. But this commando training is at an advanced level in this anti-terrorist course. "In basic course, we don't focus much on weapons but as the militants are now equipped with sophisticated weapons, we have been training them wilt almost every weapon- automatic, AK 47, two –inch mortar, LMG, grenades, AGL etc," adds Dr Ashok Bhan.

Having trained numberless batches of police officers including the Deputy Police Superintendents, Umardin Chauhan, Instructor, Sher-e-Kashmir Police Academy feels that the women cops are more confident about their capabilities. Extremely proud of the fact that his students have reached top positions in the state police, Chauhan always tells the girls that they are equal among all.

"*Grade Barabar To Parade Barabar* (Equal grade, equal prade)," he quips when asked about the training of the women cops in the Academy. Till last year, only one anti-terrorist course was conducted for women-cops in the Academy but now the Academy is conducting this course regularly.

Dr Ashok Bhan, the main motivating force behind this anti-terrorist course says, "Anti-terrorist operation is a very specialized field of activity and one must not only be proficient in handling weapons but should be well versed with tactics and operation in built up as well as other areas. And why should women police be left behind?" He informs that the training of

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women police is high on the agenda of the J&K Police as they have strength of over 2000 women police and it is desirable that at least 20 per cent of them go through one course or the other in the Academy during a particular year. The calendar of courses has suitably been modified to ensure that regular anti-terrorist course is held for women cops besides the basic course and pre-promotion course. In fact, there are exclusive training and pre-promotion courses for women in unarmed combat and achieving proficiency in anti-terrorist operations in the Academy.

Time has come when women-police need to be assigned all kinds of duties keeping in view the external threats in the sensitive state of Jammu and Kashmir.

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Undeterred 'Angels of Mercy'

For Major Shalini Vasudevan, a young gynecologist from the Army Medical Corps (AMC) posted in troubled Kashmir valley on a Temporary Duty (TD), nothing was more satisfying and rewarding than treating hundreds and thousands of Kashmiri women who are normally quite shy of getting examined by male doctors in far flung areas of the troubled region. Equally satisfying experience it was for her colleague Lieutenant Colonel (Dr.) Sree Lata who treaded four feet high snow in freezing temperature in Tangdhar and Devar sectors in North Kashmir on the Line of Control and treated the women patients.

Each day, Major Shalini would get hundreds of women patients in the Sub-District Hospital Shopian in South Kashmir where she was posted for few days. Kashmiri women would come to them with all kind of gynecological problems including infections, hygiene, infertility etc and would talk to them without any inhibition. In fact, for the first time, the civilian administration in J&K had sought the Army's assistance to provide a team of lady gynecologists to help their civilian

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colleagues in holding medical camps in the remote and backward areas of the state. The Army responded gallantly to the state administration notwithstanding the fact that the female gynecologists are in short supply even in the Army. A team of three lady gynecologists were pooled from various stations of the Army and deputed to go to the remote areas to participate in the medical camps which were being organized by the state government in the terrorist- infested regions of Kashmir.

Major Shalini Vasudevan was among these three army lady doctors who participated in this "mission of mercy". She and her colleagues Lt. Colonel (Dr.) Sree Kala and Major (Dr.) V Kushare operated for a period of over one month in these remote hot-beds of the terrorists, totally oblivious of their personal safety. Their only mission was to help their sisters in these remote areas.

Setting an example of excellent teamwork, they participated with their civilian colleagues in medical camps at Devar, Tangdhar and Kupwara and later these ladies participated in the medical camps at Duru, Shopian and Handwara followed by the medical camps at Sopore, Pampore and Handwara. During the period, an impressive total of 2595 Kashmiri ladies were treated free of cost by them in the rural areas where no advance medical facilities exist. Besides, between them, the three doctors treated 1798 gynecological cases, 175 cases of infertility and 622 other diseases. They also carried out 48 Tubectomy operations, 10 Copper T insertions and 30 minor operations.

Their presence proved to be a great boon for the women of these backward areas. They were overjoyed by this courageous gesture of their Army sisters. A tremendous amount of goodwill was generated by their selfless devotion to duty. Apparently, this goodwill generated for the Army and civilian authorities was too much for the terrorists to stomach.

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On 7 February 2004, the Medical Superintendent of the Sub divisional hospital at Shopian informed Major Shalini that the terrorists had been issuing threats against her and requested her to move back a little earlier than usual. When the convoy taking Major Shalini Vasudevan was moving back to the Brigade Headquarters, the terrorists lobbed a grenade at what they thought was her vehicle. However while Shalini narrowly escaped death but three army jawans who were following her in the next vehicle suffered severe splinter injuries.

"For a while, I couldn't understand what had happened. As soon as it hit me that it was a grenade attack, I got down and started evacuating my jawans and other civilians to the hospital as they had lobbed the grenade in a crowded civil area," recalls Major Shalini adding that 26 innocent civilians were wounded in the grenade blast.

She vividly recalls that they had generated so much of goodwill through their good work in all these areas that people had started revering them. But at the same time, few people in the SDH told them that they should not cure the patients in army uniform but instead should wear civil dress.

"I would argue that why shouldn't I wear my uniform. And moreover I used to tell them that I am not a soldier but a doctor who saves the lives of the people," says Major Vasudevan who hails from New Delhi.

Undeterred by such threats and attacks, all these army doctors are ready to take up more such challenges in future and serve the humanity. However, they often ponder that how could anybody target them who were saving the civilian lives and had become *Messiah* for the Kashmiri women who are the worst sufferers of terrorism.

"What kind of Jihad is this that which targets innocent women and children and the old and the infirm? What is Major Shalini's crime? That she had put her life on the line of fire to treat her

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sisters in the remote reaches of Kashmir? Did she, a defenseless woman and a doctor deserve to be killed by a lethal grenade? Terrorists who commit such crimes against humanity are the sworn enemies of the people of J&K," angrily asks Brigadier G.D. Bakshi, Brigadier general Staff (media), Northern Command. He goes on to add that the grenade is the most cowardly form of attack which the terrorists use in crowded places to cause maximum damage to the innocent civilian population. By and large, the bulk of their victims are helpless women and children who have never harmed a fly in their lives. And here also in this attack, a young Kashmiri girl Asifa died.

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Beyond their isolated lives

Life hasn't been easy for Taazeem Akhtar, 19, a young girl hailing from Mandi area of border district of Poonch, situated close to the Line of Control in Jammu province. In a region which is faced with a protracted conflict for the past almost two decades now, life has thrown many challenges and hurdles before the young girl who lost her father when she was quite young. For her mother, the lone bread-earner for the entire family of six daughters, bringing up her children with dignity was her only priority. In a life full of uncertainties and insecurities emanating from the fact that Poonch district is infested with militancy, Taazeem could never step out of the region and explore the vastness of the country.

Nonetheless, she is among those few lucky women who could see a train for the first time recently when they were out on a "Sadhbhavana visit" to New Delhi, Ajmer and Rajasthan. This group comprising of 34 women including Taazeem was selected by the Dah Division of army for this motivational and education tour whose theme was *"Nari Shakti Shanti Path Par"*.

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Surprising it may sound, but just 3-4 girls of the group had visited Jammu city before the tour while rest of them had never moved out of their respective homes in Poonch and Rajouri districts. Most of these women had led extremely insulated lives, not having been to any school, nor venturing beyond their village's boundaries.

Over two months ago, when army approached various women and girls from the districts of Rajouri and Poonch for the proposed tour to Delhi, Ajmer and Jaipur under the Indian Army's 'Operation Sadbhavana', persuasion wasn't so easy to achieve. More so because for all these years, army had organized goodwill tours for the village elders, school children, Maulvis (religious preachers) but never for the women folk of the area. It was for the first time that they were set out for a sadbhavna tour for the women of this militancy-hit region.

For Lieutenant Ruchika Goel, an army officer posted in the region, lot of effort was involved to persuade the women to come for the tour. But once they agreed, they were amazed to the beautiful country that India is. Thanks to *"Nari Shakti Shanti Path Par"*, today these 34 women from terror-affected areas of Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir have returned to their respective villages with a change that has to be seen to believe.

Taazeem Akhtar from Sakhlu village, near Mandi in Poonch today wants to wear trendy dresses. Keen to experiment with her scissor and sewing machine at the women empowerment centre in Mandi where she teaches stitching and tailoring to many other girls, she plans to use her recently acquired knowledge of fashion in cosmopolitan cities, such as Delhi, to teach girls in her village.

"I work in a stitching centre and now I am going to tell girls how to dress up and use make-up," says Taazeem. Elderly women (women and girls in the tour ranged from age group

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of 18 to 50 years) like

Kaneez Begum, a resident of Noushera in Rajouri, says that they would now send her daughters to school and they have right to education.

"We are feeling empowered now," says Kaneez adding earlier, they used to look at the army passing by in their areas and were awed by them. Now, they have traveled with them and they feel they are also capable of doing something. Clearly, the chance to see how the other half lives has opened new vistas for these women. The transformation in their attitude, beliefs and personalities is amazing.

While Mehmooda Akhtar, 28, of Naushera took her mother along in this tour, the team leader Shah Begum had her young grandson accompanying her all through. All of them, who hadn't seen anything but turmoil, violence and uncertainties for the past 20 years, have fond memories of the tour.

For all of them, a visit to the holy shrine of Ajmer Sharif was a dream come true. Another day out in the Pink City Jaipur and a visit to historical places like Hawa Mahal, Central Museum, Birla Planetarium was indeed a fun. Rashtrapati Bhawan, Jama Masijid, India Gate, Red Fort and a joy ride in Metro...and on the top of it an interaction with the Prez...something that all of them cannot forget.

"We met the President Mrs. Pratibha Patil also in Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi. It was one of the most memorable moments of my life as I could never imagine that one day I would get to see country's first women president," says Gulnaaz Choudhary, from Saagra village in militancy-infested Mendhar tehsil of Poonch.

Prez Patil was very keen to know from the group what professions they were pursuing. They told her that some of them are involved in agriculture while others have taken up

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tailoring and stitching for which the Army has helped them. "She told us that we were brave as we have been facing up to terrorism and she also urged us to help the Army in its efforts to fight terrorism in the state," informs Choudhary adding perhaps they would never get another such an opportunity to travel outside their district and state, to see the development and progress that has taken place in the country

"Our endeavour was to bring about a social change in strife-torn Jammu and Kashmir through the women in the border and rural areas of the state who are stepping out of their homes to broaden their horizons and get a glimpse of the rest of the country," says Lieutenant Colonel Sunil Chandran, Officer Incharge.

"The initiative has reduced the gap between the Army and the civilians," says Lt Ruchika Goel who was one of the two female officers of Indian army who accompanied the women on this tour. She hopes it would also go a long way in providing women of this region with an opportunity to reach beyond the isolation of their own habitat.

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7.2 War widows

The Missing Warriors

Years ago in 2001, when I visited Sardarni Nirmal Kaur, 70, and her family in a small locality in Nanak Nagar area of Jammu city, the entire family was glued to a black and white television set in the corner of their two-room house. Years later, the family is still hooked on to their old television set- not watching any movie or thriller but witnessing the release of two Prisoners of War (POWs) Jagseer Singh and Arif Mohammed from Wagah border. With tearful eyes, the entire family is listening to some more developments regarding the return of 54 prisoners of

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1971 war from Pakistani jail. One among them is their head of the family and Sardarni Nirmal Kaur's husband Subedar Assa Singh.

In the summer of 2001 when the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was meeting his counterpart General Parvez Mushrraf in Agra, this family would not miss even a single news bulletin for many of these carried stories about missing defence personnel in 1971 war. But nothing happened and the Parliament attack poured cold water on their hopes to see their beloved Subedar Assa Singh, the 1971 Prisoner Of War, return to his home. In the backdrop of renewed Indo-Pak relations and the exchange of two PoWs Jagseer singh and Mohammad Arif, the hopes of his family to see him alive, have again been rekindled.

Ravinder Kaur, 40, has no memories of her father. She was born four months after Sudebar Assa Singh went missing in the 1971 was from Chamb sector in Jammu and Kashmir. Her elder sister Satwant, who was one-year old at the time, also doesn't recall anything about her father. All they know about him is through newspaper reports and the documents their mother has preserved in a small iron box in their two-room house in Nanak Nagar area of Jammu city.

Life has not been kind to their mother Nirmal Kaur. Left alone with five small daughters and two sons 40 years ago, all her relatives deserted her when her husband went missing. But she struggled hard to build her children's lives. The hope of seeing her husband someday made her face the challenges boldly.

Little did she know that the Diwali of 1971 would be the last festival she would celebrate with her husband Subedar Assa Singh of 5 Sikh Regiment. Originally from Bagh tehsil (now in Pakistan-occupied -Kashmir), his parents had migrated to Jammu and settled there. After joining the Indian Army in 1951,

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he was promoted as Subedar in 1971.

A white dupatta draped over her head, Sardarni Nirmal Kaur who has aged much early, recalls that there was no news from her husband after that Diwali. The Subedar who participated in the war which began on 3rd December 1971, went missing after a couple of days. On 17 December, the family received a telegram from his unit saying that he was "killed in action".

Surprisingly, two days after that, many people who knew Subedar heard him speak on Radio Pakistan along with other Prisoners of War (PoWs). He clearly stated his name and his family members' names, his rank and address.

"Immediately, we became hopeful about my father being alive," says Devinder Kaur, the Subedar's eldest daughter who was 15-year old at the time. What strengthened the belief was the release of an Indian from a Pakistani jail in 1988. This person Mohinder Pal who hails from village Floura in Ranbir Singh Pura sub-sector in Jammu told the family that he had met the Subedar who was quite ill in Pakistani.

Nirmal informs that Mohinder Pal had met an army man who was ill in a Pakistani hospital. He had been shifted to the hospital from a Pak jail. This man on the bed informed Pal that he was Assa Singh and it was on the basis of the address given by him that he (Pal) had come to Nanak Nagar in Jammu to convey the message.

Their hopes were again raised when in 1996, the Indian Express published a list of 54 Prisoners of War of 1971 in Pakistani jails. Subedar Assa Singh's name was among those of five defence personnel who had gone missing from the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1971. Others were Lt. P R Sharma, 5/8 Grenadiers, Rajouri, Sudedar Kali Dass, 8 J&K Light Infantry, Havaldar Krishan Lal, 1 J&K Rifles, Udhampur and Grenadier Madan Mohan, 95 Mountain Regiment.

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Once again the family began correspondence with the Indian army and the Missing Defence Persons Relatives Association (MDPRA), hoping to get him freed.

Every time there is some improvement in Indo-Pak relations, Nirmal Kaur and her family remains glued to the television set (as they did during General Musharraf's visit hoping that he and the then Prime Minister Vajpayee would reach an agreement on the release of the 54 PoWs). Their hopes are once again raised as they saw two PoWs being released. Nirmal's voice quivers as she tells that she has never lost the hope to her husband alive.

During the past four decades, Nirmal often thought of writing to Pakistani generals but was scared to do so. And she had a solid reason to be so. She recalls sadly that when they wrote to army authorities refuting their claims about the Subedar being killed in action, her son-in-law, an army man, was harassed. Some CID officials came to her house, harassed her family and asked how they came to know about the Subedar's whereabouts. "Even that poor man from R S Pura who had seen Subedar sahib in the Pakistani jail, was so much harassed by them that he snapped all links with us, "she informs.

Tears well up in her eyes as she recalls the tough times she faced in all these years bringing up her minor children. She would put a cooking pot on the stove with water in it and tell the children that she was cooking *Dal.*

"Despite all the difficulties, I have lived with dignity along with my seven children and taught them the same," she says. All her daughters are married. The elder son Harcharan has a government job and the younger one Baldev, drives an auto-rickshaw in Jammu city. She says had her husband not been "kept a prisoner of war, her children would have been better off."

The only support she got was from her husband's 5 Sikh

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Regiment. Besides helping the family on the occasion of her daughters' marriages, jawans from the unit also used to visit their colony and rebuke the residents for harassing a soldier's family. Nirmal breaks down while narrating how society – her relatives, neighbours and other – made life tough for her. "In difficult times, nobody stands by you," she says. The then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi had promised that all the 1971 war victims would get petrol pumps allotments. However, nobody ever got that.

Nirmal Kaur's only source of income all these years was her husband's salary, later converted into pension. For seven years, she continued getting Rs 323 as Subedar Assa Singh's salary and later they survived on his pension. Though he was promoted as Subedar on 20 May 1971, surprisingly she continues getting his pension against the post of Naib Subedar. Having written to army authorities many a times, she hasn't got any satisfactory reply. As her husband was awarded the Raksha Medal and Sangram Medals "posthumously" by the army, she is sometimes invited to army functions which she attends. Nirmal feels that the Government of India should give the same benefits given to the Kargil victims to the 1965 and 1971 war victims also as they and their families have suffered badly.

Similar is the story of Kanta Devi, wife of Subedar Kali Dass. His name also figures in the list of POWs languishing in Pakistani jails. Her husband Subedar Kali Dass of 8 Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry had come home on leave to spend some time with his family. But with the outbreak of war, he was recalled to join the front in Chhamb sector.

The sequence of events in Kanta Devi's life is no different from that of Nirmal Kour's. Soon after the war began, she and her five small children received a telegram from the army saying that Kalidass was killed in action. But two days later, the family which was in a state of shock, heard him speak over Radio

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Pakistan.

Kanta's eldest son, Ramesh who was nine years' old at the time, recalls that seven months' later, an army vehicle came to their house and handed over mangled body saying it was the Subedar's. Though the family believed that it was not his body, however, their relatives performed the last rites but never held the Kriya ceremony.

Their hopes were raised when they read the Subedar's name in the list of PoWs in the newspapers followed by a letter from MDPRA vice-president M.K.Paul that the Subedar was in a Pakistani jail and they were trying to secure his release. But nothing positive has come out so far. For these families of PoWs, the endless wait continues.

PoWs and Bollywood

Every time a Bollywood blockbuster "Deewar" which revolves around the lives of the 33 prisoners of war (PoWs) who haven't returned to their families after 1971 Indo-Pak war and are languishing in Pakistani jails, is shown by the local cable TV network in Jammu, the entire family of Subedar Assa Singh glues to the television. Tears do not stop flowing from their eyes. For they relate themselves with these PoWs top-lined by Major Ranvir (Amitabh Bachchan) who has tried to escape jail 17 times from various Pakistani jails in this film. Ultimately, with the help of his son Akshaye Khanna, he and other Indian prisoners are able to escape the Pakistani jail.

Not only "Deewar", but celebrity director-producer Yash Chopra's popular flick "Veer Zara", is also based on the protagonist Shahrukh Khan languishing in a Pakistani jail. Though he is an IAF officer, yet he has been put behind the Pakistani bars by his beloved Preity Zinta's fiancé on false accusations. And Veer Pratap Singh alias SRK spends 22 years of his life in Pakistani prison for her love Zara Hayat Khan.

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In the past few years, a number of Bollywood films have been released which revolve around the theme of Indian prisoners languishing in Pakistani jails. Though the producers/directors have tried to rake up patriotism of Indian audience through such films, however a section of the intelligentsia has objected to such films as both India and Pakistan are trying to make peace inch by inch. They believe that such films can hinder the peace process. Perhaps, the Bollywood producers have realized it too. The latest release on the theme *"Ab Tumhare Hawale Watan Sathiyo"* having a star cast including Amitabh Bachchan, Akshay Kumar and Bobby Deol shows a Pakistani colonel's (Danny Danzogpa) change of heart. Akshay Kumar, an army officer who was in Pakistani jail gets some support from the Pakistani army officer who is in favour of better relations with Pakistan.

It is also true about "Veer-Zara" in which Rani Mukherjee, a Pakistani lawyer takes up the cudgels and secures the release of Shah Rukh Khan after 22 years from a Pakistani jail. Such films have also brought a fresh hope for the families of the Indian prisoners in Pakistani jails for they believe that the day is not far when their loved ones would be with them soon.

List of Indian PoWs in Pakistan

The following names of 54 Indian prisoners of war (POWs) languishing in Pakistan jails since the 1971 India-Pakistan war have been provided by the Missing Defence Personnel Relatives Association (MDPRA). This list also lies with the Government of India.

Indian Air Force

Wg. Cdr. H.S. Gill

Sqn. Ldr. Devaprashad Chatterjee

Sqn Ldr. Mohinder Kumar Jain

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Sqn. Ldr. Jal Maniksha Mistry
Sqn. Ldr. Jatinder Das Kumar
Flt. Lt. Tanmaya Singh Dandass
Flt. Lt. Ramesh Gulabrao Kadam
Flt. Lt. Babul Guha
Flt. Lt. Gurdev Singh Rai
Flt. Lt. Ashok Balwani Dhavale
Flt. Lt. Srikant Chandrakant Mahajan
Flt. Lt. Sudhir Kumar Goswami
Flt. Lt. Harvinder Singh
Flt. Lt. Vijay Vasant Tambay
Flt. Lt. Ilyoo Moses Sasoon
Flt. Lt. Ram Metharam Advani
Flt. Lt. Nagaswami Shankar
Flt. Lt. Suresh Chandra Sandal
Flt. Lt. Kushalpal Singh Nanda
Flt. Lt. Manohar Purohit
Fg. Off. Sudhir Tyagi
Fg. Off. Kishan Lakhimal Malkani
Fg. Off. Kottiezath Puthiyavettil Murlidharan
Fg. Off. Tejinder Singh Sethi

Indian Army

Maj S.P.S. Waraich
Maj Kanwaljit Sandhu
Maj Jaskiran Singh Malik
Maj S.C. Guleri
Maj A.K. Ghosh
Maj Ashok Suri

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Captain Ravinder Kaura
Capt Kalyan Singh Rathod
Capt Giri Raj Singh
Capt O.P. Dalal
Capt Kamal Bakshi
Capt Vashisht Nath
2/Lt Sudhir Mohan Sabharwal
2/Lt Paras Ram Shama
2/Lt Vijay Kumar Azad
Corpal Pal Singh
Sub Asa Singh
Sub Kali Das
L/Hav Krishan Lal Sharma
L/NK Hazoora Singh
L/NK Balbir Singh
Sepoy S. Chauhan
Sepoy Dilar Singh
Sepoy Jagir Singh
Sepoy Jagdish Lal
Gnr. Madan Mohan
Gnr. Sujan Singh
Gnr. Gyan Chand
Gnr. Shyam Singh

Indian Navy

Lt. Cdr. Ashok Roy

Other possible POWs

Flt. Lt. Sudhesh Kumar Chibber
Capt Dalgir Singh Jamwal

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8

Looking Forward

The past two decades of conflict have left a deep impact on the women of Jammu and Kashmir yet they have lived through the political turbulence and negotiated and renegotiated their roles in the turbulent circumstances. In the absence of their men folk in the family who become victims of violence, women broke away from the traditional protectiveness thus altering stereotypes and performing the role of head of the family thrust upon them, with considerable success. That was indeed commendable especially in the backdrop that they had no work experience and were forced to support their families and thus take over the role of a patriarch. When the women who had supported militancy in the initial years of turmoil in Jammu and Kashmir, started rejecting it and talk about peace, it emanated from the pain that Kashmir conflict had inflicted upon them. That was a big turning point in the violence-hit state.

The narratives of the women in almost all the chapters of the book "Voices Unheard - Women, Conflict and Kashmir" clearly give us an insight into the fact that women in J&K aren't the passive recipients of conflict but have an inborn, innate resilience and the will to survive the most challenging situations. The theory of survival truly fits in their case as their strength of character also gets visible from the various difficult situations that they got confronted with. And in the process, they emerge stronger. Be it Parveena Ahangar who is trying to bring all those

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women together whose kiths and kins have gone missing in the past 20 years of conflict or the Gujjar women who used to be sexually exploited by the terrorists but decided to end their agony by picking up the gun for their self defence, the overall importance of women's initiatives is far from insignificant. These women - the mothers of disappeared sons or the displaced Kashmiri Pandit women, or even those women who are faced with a harrowing time bringing up their children in the absence of their father - fervently hope that peace on the borders will extend to their villages, towns and homes.

As is reflected through their narratives in the book, peace to them means the absence of physical violence in a system based on social security, equal opportunities, access to resources, economic rights, accountability, developed and child-welfare oriented society. The women of J&K want a society where there is social justice, progress and development for all groups. For most of these women, peace begins with their immediate family and extends to cover the whole region, country and the world.

Conclusions

Women of Jammu and Kashmir need to be empowered as it would not only shape the path for peace and reconciliation but would also lead to peace and development of the state. Peace building attempts in order to promote sustainable peace, need to address and transform structures which not only refer to the system of access and distribution of resources, but also social and political institutions, situations and relationships. In this process, principles of democratic participation, human rights and gender equality are crucial elements for the longer-term process of building peace based on social justice and equality for women.

Women also need to be economic empowered by providing her better employment opportunities. For those uneducated widows and their orphan children, skills building programmes

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or vocational training need to be given to them so that they are able to sustain themselves economically.

In fact, a three-tier effort is needed which should include individuals, society and the state. All of them need to coordinate, organize and implement relevant programs for the betterment of the women and children and both of these are correlated. Involvement of grassroots functionaries and non-governmental organizations in a big way would help shape a community approach to tackle the problems. The NGOs, whose presence is very less in Kashmir, also need to work more and take serious initiatives in this regard.

No programme can be effective without political will and a commitment at the governmental and administrative level. Even as manpower and infrastructure is available, the absence of women's involvement will hampers even well-meaning programmes from creating the required impact. In the absence of women in movements and democratic politics, women's concerns and aspirations in conflict and peacemaking remain hostage to male-dominated, patriarchal, militant and democratic leaders. This unfortunately has happened in Kashmir also. Kashmiri women have remained under-represented in political and decision-making positions. A strong women's political activism is still not visible in J&K. Ironically, the 89-member J&K state assembly comprises of just one woman representative Sakina Itoo who is the state social welfare minister. The only visible face in Kashmir politics has been that of Begun Sheikh Abdullah, wife of Sheikh Abdullah who remained a Member Parliament twice, but that too by virtue of being the Sheikh's wife. And now it is Mehbooba Mufti, president of Peoples Democratic Party who is also the daughter of former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mufti Sayeed. These handfuls of women have been able to carve some political space only because of their political family backgrounds.

Women voices from Jammu and Kashmir have also been

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conspicuous by their absence in the dialogue processes that are now unfolding in the terrorism-hit state. Even none of the Kashmiri women, except the high profile president of People's Democratic Party Ms. Mehbooba Mufti, was part of Prime Minister Dr. Man Mohan Singh's five working groups on Kashmir which were set up after second Round Table Conference on Kashmir. Recently, Kashmir interlocutors Mr. Dilip Pandgaonkar, Dr Radha Kumar and Mr. M.M.Ansari organized a women's conference to know the viewpoints of the women regarding the resolution of Kashmir issue.

Women of J&K need to be involved in various intra-state dialogue processes too. Steps need to be taken to address this serious gap. Women's equal participation in political life, as voters, candidates and members of electoral committees, could play a crucial role in the empowerment of women and the reconstruction of violence-hit society. Adequate representation of women in the state legislature needs to be actively encouraged. And any peace process that excludes more than half the population, i.e., greatly risks the possibility of keeping several creative solutions and options out.

As the conflict in J&K is increasingly discussed and debated among women and their involvement intensifies, it is indeed hoped that the process gains creative momentum, thus assuaging the fears and anguish of thousands of women in the region and more and more of them will have more say in the decisions that affect their lives.

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TERRORIST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN J&K
(JANUARY 1990 TO JULY 2011)

Sr. No.	Nature of Incident	1990	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	2000	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	Total
1	Total women killed by millitants	118	28	27	36	30	74	80	28	82	90	43	103	123	94	82	52	45	14	7	19	4	5	1184
2A	Women abducted/ hanged to death	0	0	2	0	3	1	0	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	17
2B	Women abducted and killed other than by hanging	2	1	7	6	10	12	5	3	3	2	5	16	10	11	9	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	108
2C	Women abducted/ raped and killed	0	0	0	1	4	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
2D	Women abducted shot and injured	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
3	Total women abducted	8	8	13	26	20	31	20	19	10	16	15	19	13	19	20	11	7	3	3	0	0	0	281
	Source : Jammu and Kashmir Police, J & K.																	Total						1603

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Women in Jammu and Kashmir have been hit hard by the armed conflict since past 21 years. Labeled as widows, half-widows, wives of disappeared or slain husbands, mothers of disappeared sons, wives of militants, women victims of physical abuse, rape victims, women heads of households, refugee women, etc., they are the direct victims of violence ranging from rape to kidnapping, murder to molestation. 'Voices Unheard - Women, Conflict and Kashmir' is a consortium of all such women voices from all the three regions of J&K. The book documents the experiences of Kashmiri women, Pandit women, Gujjar women, Ladakhi women and those serving in the security forces, in coping with the impact of conflict and the options before them. While there are stories about the women who faced violence perpetrated against them in politically conflicted and militarized areas that Jammu and Kashmir has become, yet there are amazing stories about the resilience of these women who suffered a lot but the conflict provided them a space to resist, negotiate, cope and survive. These are the stories about their struggles and survival, trials and tribulations, life and death narrated in their own voices.

By sharing voices of women of Jammu and Kashmir, the book tries to examine as how their multiple identities are created and recreated, how women live up to their roles and how their roles change because of the situation they are in. Though a number of women perspectives have emerged from Kashmir in the past few years, yet the unique thing about this book is that it brings together a plethora of women voices from all the three regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.

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